Strange Spaces & Stranger Sensibilities: Feminist Counter-Publicity in the Digital Age

by

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ABSTRACT

Strange Spaces and Stranger Sensibilities:
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This dissertation offers a theoretical account of the politics of feminist computer-mediated communication (CMC), arguing that both the discursive dimensions of CMC and the affordances of CMC platforms cultivate new public subjects. The analysis challenges dominant approaches to the politics of online public speech that remain tethered to liberal public sphere theory or more recently, to radical democratic theory. I do so by attending to the enduring significance of embodiment—specifically, the embodied particularity of public speakers and of their addressees—in over thirty years of feminist CMC. Examining diverse moments from that history, I suggest that feminist CMC contributes to democratic theory and theories of language politics through its enactment of a "feminized" public subject: a subject whose acknowledged vulnerabilities demand attention to social and political inequality as they reframe it and whose communicative practices engender productively new, and newly contrary, postures of agonistic struggle.

Chapter One explores early discourse about "cyberspace" as a new public sphere. Disambiguating conflicting accounts of what disembodied communication enabled, I show how a liberal conception of public speech was rearticulated as both an ideal and an impossibility online, thus diminishing the perceived political value of CMC. Chapter Two examines feminist speech on Usenet, an early and influential CMC platform. I illustrate how affordances of public CMC defanged the political speech of Usenet feminists, rendering it the equivalent of what Lauren Berlant terms "female complaint." Chapter Three argues that the "safe spaces" of the contemporary feminist blogosphere cultivate an alternative "feminized" subject whose complaints are better understood as political demands that challenge rather than reflect neoliberal hegemony. Chapter Four considers the recent migration of trigger warnings (TWs) from online to offline spaces, in order to probe the reception of the "feminized" political subject. Pursuing the affective resonances between what researchers have termed "white fragility" and the reception of TWs, I consider how a viscerally-charged rejection of embodied vulnerability works to sustain the phantasmatic figure of an abstract, sovereign self in left-progressive as well as liberal political visions.

INTRODUCTION

THEORIZING THE POLITICS OF COUNTER-PUBLICITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

> … they fight as much for the preservation of themselves as they fight for the preservation of others. This movement toward consciousness—born of techno advocacy practices that span computer mediated and non-computer mediated contexts– is a threshold where we can see ourselves through the eyes of others and by way of panoramic views.
>
> - Tara L. Conley, "An Open Letter to Amanda Marcotte"[1]

I. Introduction

This dissertation offers a theoretical account of the politics of feminist computer-mediated communication (CMC). I proceed by tracing the development of collaborative, formally open-access online feminist speech communities over more than thirty years. My account attends to the entanglement of, on the one hand, the "poetic" function of public address in cultivating—through generic form, style, mode of delivery, protocols, and content—the subjects who write, read, "share," and comment, and, on the other hand, the materialization of ideals of public speech in built CMC platforms and speech practices.

Political theory is not well prepared to make sense of the political work of online feminist speech communities and practices. In point of fact, CMC—feminist or otherwise—has not been a central site of analysis for contemporary political theory. This

[1] Tara L. Conley, "An Open Letter to Amanda Marcotte," *The Feminist Wire*, March 3, 2013, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/03/an-open-letter-to-amanda-marcotte/ (accessed December 20, 2015).
[2] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 114.
[3] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.
[4] Boeder, "Habermas' Heritage: The future of the public sphere in the network society"; Dahlberg, "The

is surprising given a robust and diverse literature that identifies speech, writing, and communicative exchange as central to, if not constitutive of, democratic praxis. I collectively refer to this literature, which includes deliberative, agonistic and radical approaches to democracy, as well as rhetorical approaches to language politics, as discursive democratic theory.

To the extent CMC has been taken up, discursive democratic theorists have tended to proceed by implicit or explicit reference to Jürgen Habermas's liberal public sphere theory or, more recently, by reference to radical democratic theory, especially that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Little has been done to theorize the poetics of online public speech, to borrow and elaborate on what Michael Warner terms the "poetic world building" function of publics.[2] Analyzing the varied linguistic practices and the material context of CMC that structure relationships between strangers, my dissertation articulates a politics of feminist CMC that extends beyond sheltering or bearing witness to that which is excluded by a (neo)liberal hegemony. What's more, my study of feminist CMC disrupts theoretical and popular accounts of feminist activism as "stuck," whether by the challenges of organizing across different politicized identities in order to address complex, global problems, or "stuck in the past," as post-feminists would have it.

II. The Long Shadow of Liberal Public Sphere Theory

Jürgen Habermas's liberal bourgeois public looms large in the study of online public speech. As theorized in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (*STPS*), the

[2] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 114.

liberal public sphere is an imagined but no less real zone of democratic participation.[3] Formally open to all, the public sphere stands apart from the (also public) state, as well as a private sphere, comprised of the economy and an intimate sphere of the conjugal family. On Habermas's account, deliberation and discursive exchange in the public sphere enables "the people" to be represented and rationalized. The outcome of citizenry deliberation is "public opinion," which directs and constrains the state, thereby submitting power to reason, supplementing formal democratic institutions like voting, and safeguarding against a tyranny of the majority.

Those who take their bearing from Habermas's liberal public sphere theory have largely proceeded by asking whether or to what extent public discourse on CMC reflects Habermas's model, or how it might better do so.[4] Early enthusiasm that CMC might foster a revitalized public sphere, characterized by robust, self-directed public discussion of matters of common concern, has largely been supplanted by criticism of CMC's democratic potential, much of which suggests "we"—citizens of developed democracies—might be worse off than ever before. These critiques typically cite one or more of four overlapping concerns: CMC *fails to deliver on the promise of universal access*; CMC *fragments or fails to cultivate a unitary public*; CMC is *inadequately connected to institutions* which translate the people's will as "public opinion" into policy; and CMC has been *co-opted by commercial interests*. I survey these concerns below.

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[3] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.
[4] Boeder, "Habermas' Heritage: The future of the public sphere in the network society"; Dahlberg, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere"; Charles Ess, "The Political Computer: Democracy, CMC, and Habermas," in Ess, *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Conversation*; Gimmler, "Deliberative Democracy, the Public Sphere and the Internet"; Douglas Kellner, "Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention," in Hahn, *Perspectives on Habermas*; Saco, *Cybering Democracy: Public Space and the Internet.*

Historically, the liberal bourgeois public sphere did not deliver on the promise of inclusivity. Instead, it was white, property-owning men who peopled "the public" and served as its mouthpiece.[5] Nonetheless, Habermas argued that because bourgeois practices of publicity were grounded in a universalistic discourse, they can and have provided means for excluded others to make claims upon the state.[6] In other words, the claim is that the non-inclusivity of the idealized liberal public reflected contingent, historical conditions and thus did not determine the liberatory *potential* of the discursive, ratio-critical practice of publicity.[7] Many imagined that, with the development of CMC, the historical and technological conditions were ripe for a truly inclusive public sphere: Relatively low-cost access to a myriad of sources and information, relatively low barriers to expressing one's views, and the ability to cross borders (both literal and metaphorical) were cited as reasons why CMC might deliver on the promise of a universal public sphere.

"Digital divide" scholarship offered a powerful rejoinder to the implicit technological determinism of these accounts, exploring the persistence and even exacerbation of offline inequality in the wake of CMC's development.[8] Literature on the "digital divide" has compellingly critiqued the notion that the Internet is broadly accessible and that those who do have access have equal means—education, finances,

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[5] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy"; Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

[6] Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 429.

[7] Habermas's later work on a theory of communicative action may rightly be understood as a means of articulating that ideal as realizable apart from "a single epoch" and its limited beneficiaries. See: Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," 442.

[8] "Technological determinism" is a term coined by Raymond Williams in 1974 to capture to the common presumption that "new technologies are invented… in an independent sphere [that is, apart from extant relations of power], and then create new societies or new human conditions." See: Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. To be clear, I do not mean to indicate here that Habermas's account in STPS is technologically determinist.

skills—with which to make use of it.[9] At the same time, this literature does not contest the presumption of the liberal bourgeois public sphere as only historically, contingently non-inclusive. In response to the question of inclusivity, this literature can be read as concluding "not yet." Related, digital divide scholarship tends to affirm a sharp line between on- and offline realities, implying that addressing inequalities in the latter will resolve those observed in the former.[10]

Habermas himself does not address the digital divide, but is not sanguine about the prospect for CMC to revitalize the public sphere. Writing in 2006, he grants that the Internet has "reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers" but suggests that "the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms" caters more to "isolated issue politics" than the broad public deliberation on matters of general concern.[11] A more recent comment expresses a similar concern, emphasizing the need for "experts" to "filter" and "focus[] the attention of a dispersed public of citizens."[12]

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[9] See, for example: Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies*; Menzies, *Whose brave new world? The Information Highway and the New Economy*; Last Moyo, "The Digital Divide: Scarcity, Inequality and Conflict," in Creeber and Martin, *Digital Cultures*; Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*; Doug Schuler, "Reports of the Close Relationship between Democracy and the Internet May Have Been Exaggerated," in Jenkins, *Democracy and New Media*.

[10] Rheingold shared this view, suggesting an increase in women's "visibility" would address an initial "barrage" of harassment online. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, "Chapter Nine: Electronic Frontiers and Online Activists" http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/9.html.

[11] Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," 423 (Footnote 3). Interestingly, R. Stuart Geiger has suggested the filtering role Habermas imagines experts playing is being fill, but by algorithms. Geiger argues a manufactured "integration," and not "fragmentation," ought to be of concern. See: Geiger, "Does Habermas Understand the Internet? The Algorithmic Construction of the Blogo/Public Sphere."

[12] Jürgen Habermas, quoted in Stuart Jeffries, "A Rare Interview with Jürgen Habermas" Interestingly, the interview was prompted in part by the creation of Habermas imposter Twitter account.

Many others shared Habermas's concern with what was being parsed as CMC's tendency to fragment a unitary public.[13]

In "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World," Nancy Fraser raises another issue, namely asymmetries between transnational public discourse and the institutions that might translate public opinion derived there into policy. Reminding theorists studying Internet publics that the concept of the liberal bourgeois public sphere "was developed not simply to understand communication flows but to contribute a normative political theory of democracy,"[14] Fraser critiques the unreflective use of the term "transnational," arguing it fails to given an account of appropriate participants or what governing entity may be constrained and directed by the public opinion formed in such a sphere. Calhoun bridges concerns with inadequate institutional uptake and commercial capture, indicating that the growing disconnect between global finance and institutions makes it unclear "how and where… activism and organizing [generated or supported by online public speech] can connect to and influence powerful institutions."[15]

At this point, the staying power of liberal public sphere theory owes less to political theory, whose enthusiasm for Habermas's account following publication of the first English translation of *STPS* in 1989 waned in the face of sustained feminist and other criticism. Scholars in communications and media studies, however, have found in Haberamas's account conceptual tools to make sense of the democratic possibilities of

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[13] Calhoun, "Community without Propinquity Revisited: Communications Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere"; Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*.
[14] Fraser, "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World."
[15] Calhoun, 392.

digital media. Of particular use was the contrast Habermas presented between a historical public sphere, where citizens voluntarily discussed matters of common concern and a mass public dominated by powerful corporate interests.

The fact that early adopters who imagined CMC as capable of radically shaking up a public imagined as ossified by mass and especially television broadcast media were also drawn to a Habermasian vision of liberal publicity surely facilitated the uptake of his work in communications and media studies. Notably, influential early adopter and author of *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold, cites Habermas's work.[16] However, others were likely influenced by what Michael Warner describes as a "treasur[ed]" and "mythic" narrative in Western societies where the democratization of literacy and print led to the development of modern democracy.[17]

While Habermas's approach has fallen out of vogue in political theory, the liberal ideal of a public comprised of individuals who abstract from their particular embodiments and material conditions in order to discuss matters of general concern remains influential. Those interested in the politics of online public speech must contend with the durability of this ideal, which is both reflected in popular, mainstream discussions of CMC and made manifest through the affordances of what would come to be recognized as "public" CMC. Thus, my first chapter narrates the means by which a "civil," liberal conception of public speech was articulated as both ideal and largely impossible online at a crucial moment in the expansion of CMC to a broader public.

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[16] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.*.
[17] Warner, *The Republic of Letters*, ix.

III. Decentering Liberal Public Sphere Theory

Recently, theorists have turned to agonistic or radical democratic theory to challenge the primacy and appropriateness of liberal public sphere theory as a lens through which to make sense of or evaluate online speech.[18] Of particular note is the work of Frances Shaw whose study of Australian feminist blogging prompted her turn to the agonistic or radical democratic theory of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. This section uses Shaw's work as an inroad for exploring what an agonistic or radical democratic theory to the politics of online public speech might bring to the study of feminist CMC.

In their germinal work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe reject all foundational grounds or "given" content to social-political identities, movements, and claims, arguing that the content and justification for social-political categories are contingent, reflecting political articulations in relation to other categories and from within a discursive structure. A discursive structure is more or less hegemonic depending on the degree to which it is able to "dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre" by articulating a logic of equivalence between particular differentiated elements and by excluding or disarticulating other, "disruptive" elements.[19]

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[18] Lincoln Dahlberg was one of the first to suggest such a course. More recently, Dahlberg has figured radical democratic theory as one "framework" among three others—liberal-individualist, (liberal) deliberative, and autonomous Marxist—for studying and evaluating the democratic possibilities of online public speech and invites his readers to evaluate the different assumptions regarding democracy and CMC which underpin each. See: Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere: Taking Difference Seriously?"; Dahlberg, "Rethinking the Fragmentation of the Cyberpublic: From Consensus to Contestation."
[19] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 112.

Mirroring feminist political theorists' and other's earlier arguments that liberal public sphere theory be understood as hegemonic,[20] Shaw illustrates how hegemonic conceptions of both "politics" and "participation" prevent the political blogging of Australian women and feminists from being recognized as such.[21] Similarly, Shaw argues that feminist bloggers' creation of "safe spaces" through barring anti-feminist speech is a necessary means for preventing such speech from dominating, making it possible to articulate their own counter-hegemonic speech.[22]

Like the feminist bloggers she studies, Shaw challenges the erasure of feminist blogging as a political act. Her richly ethnographic study offers a rejoinder to those who would characterize online feminist speech communities as anti-democratic, because unwilling to adhere to a liberal ideal of inclusivity, and also to those who continue to utilize liberal public theory to evaluate the politics of online public speech. Finally, Shaw's observation that Australian feminist bloggers countered claims made about women's absent "voices" with the assertion that mainstream political bloggers fail to "hear" or "listen" suggest fruitful points for further inquiry.

However, there are moments when Shaw's account of the political work of feminist blogging risks devolving into a valorization of pluralism, as when she characterizes the outcome of online discursive activism as enabling the visibility of "unpopular ideas."[23] If we consider speech a form of political action—what Shaw terms "discursive activism"—what exactly is the speech of the feminist bloggers Shaw studies

[20] Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*; Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere"; Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Warner, *The Republic of Letters*; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
[21] Shaw, "The Politics of Blogs: Theories of Discursive Activism Online."
[22] Ibid.; Shaw, "Still 'Searching for Safety Online': Collective Strategies and Discursive Resistance to Trolling and Harassment in a Feminist Network."
[23] Shaw, "The Politics of Blogs," 47.

doing? While there are moments where we are directed to note the different language—e.g., "listening" and "hearing"—deployed by feminist bloggers, these are characterized as different ways of conceptualizing politics rather than a different discursive practice. By and large, the political work of feminist blogging is figured as pertaining to visibility. So, for example, practices like moderation enable feminist counter-hegemonic discourse to appear and so also contest hegemonic discourse, and the appearance of feminist counter-hegemonic discourse bears witness to exclusion and marginalization from dominant publics as well as liberal public sphere theory.

I agree with Shaw's overarching point, namely, that feminist blogging is rightly understood as political. What's more, I agree that the radical democratic theory of Laclau and Mouffe aptly describes conflict over the contingently fundamental ideas that materially structure our lives, identities, and what meanings they have. But the aspiration of bloggers who characterize the creation of "safe spaces" as a form of feminist activism is not only to be visible, but also that their speech and action might cultivate a world in which such spaces are no longer necessary. As with much discursive democratic theory, the means by which feminist blogging might achieve desired (or other) ends remains underspecified.[24] Being able to articulate ideas that counter a hegemonic discourse may rightly be understood as a prerequisite to the latter, but it leaves open the question of the worldly effects of such speech.

[24] Wingrove, "Getting Intimate with Wollstonecraft: In the Republic of Letters." Discursive democratic theory has long figured the circulation of speech and writing as a. For example, letter writing and the circulation of newspapers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries have been credited with cultivating a new sense of the self as a citizen and member of a nation, and through these, as having a legitimate claim on the nation-state.

I argue that what Shaw terms counter-public theory can be productive here in ways she perhaps misses by pairing the work of Nancy Fraser with that of Michael Warner and characterizing them both as "overcoming the requirement for full inclusion that [liberal] public sphere theory requires."[25] At the same time, radical democratic theory may make it difficult to fully articulate the political work of feminist bloggers.

Indeed, Shaw seems aware of the latter when, quoting from Aletta Norval, she writes "the 'role of practices, passions and the visceral dimensions of identification' have been under-theorised."[26] Continuing to draw on Norval, Shaw writes that Laclau and Mouffe "provide[] the tools to conceptualise the role of affective devices such as sarcasm, satire, hyperbole and other affective…language use[d] in the political process… by accounting for the role of disarticulation at times of discursive dislocation."[27] Drawing from David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis's concept of "dislocation," "times of discursive dislocation" refer to moments when one experiences dissonance between that which is hegemonic or held to be common sense, and one's lived experience. In sum, Shaw suggests Mouffe's and Laclau's radical democratic theory gives us tools for recognizing feminist bloggers' use of language that frames hegemonic discourse as absurd, "as counterhegemonic discourse, and… properly understood as political action."[28]

Again, I agree with Shaw's analysis of feminist blogging as a means of contesting

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[25] Shaw, "The Politics of Blogs," 44. This description does not adequately represent the work of either Fraser or Warner. In fact, Fraser's classic critique of Habermas's liberal public sphere theory, in which she characterizes the Habermasian ideal as hegemonic and proposes directions for critical theory that seeks to understand "actually existing democracy"—rife as it is with pervasive structural inequality—seems quite amenable to Shaw's commitments. See: Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere."
[26] Shaw, "(Dis)locating Feminisms: Blog Activism as Crisis Response."
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

hegemonic discourses. Indeed, how feminist bloggers' use mockery and affectively charged language to cast as nonsensical the reigning "common sense" is a practice of feminist CMC that I take up here (Chapter 3). But mocking hegemonic discourses—contesting and framing their "givens" as absurd—is not new to feminist praxis. As Shaw notes, "[f]eminism has a strong tradition of discursive political activism, whether through consciousness-raising groups, critical media analysis or interventions in the use of language."[29] Thus one wonders if and how the feminist bloggers Shaw studies develop or depart from earlier feminist discursive activism and if and how the affordances of (different) digital mediums might matter.

Attending to these questions is particularly important given scholarship that suggests feminist speech may be rendered ineffectual as mere complaint. Lauren Berlant's work on what she terms the genre of female complaint traces the ways in which women's counter-public speech may yet be contained in such a way that it participates in the durability of the hegemonic discourse it contests.[30] Thus, one possible worldly effect of constructing online "safe spaces" is that they contribute to the durability of the world *as is*, where such spaces are needed.

What Berlant directs us to consider is how labor and discontent can be channeled in ways that ensure that the same labor will continue to be needed, and the same discontent will endure. In other words: discontent can propel one to find succor that enables one to get by, but may also keep one attached to *merely* getting by. Berlant is not unsympathetic to the pleasures of feeling that one belongs, that one is understood and recognized; indeed, the desire to understand this attachment motivates her work.

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[29] Shaw, "The Politics of Blogs," 42.
[30] Berlant, "The Female Complaint." *Social Text* (1988): 237-59.

However, she is critical of intimate publics for containing and defanging political speech and action by cultivating subjects who complain, commiserate, and survive hardships that reflect deep-seated structural inequality, but cannot fundamentally challenge those structures.[31]

Similarly, in analyzing the impossible position feminists found themselves in following the sex scandal and impeachment of former U.S. President Bill Clinton, Melissa Deem writes: "[f]eminism is caught within discursive traps which restrict the possibilities of women and feminists to articulate positions within the political. Consequently, feminism is in a bind: either refuse to speak or not be heard."[32] Given that the feminists Shaw studies responded to a hegemonic discourse of absent women and feminist "voices" by suggesting that mainstream bloggers do not "listen," it is all the more important to ask if and how feminist bloggers' call to "listen" evades reception as ineffectual complaint—how it might, following Deem, "be radically recontexualized" and create "new speaking positions."[33]

Undoubtedly, feminists bloggers' contest the figuration of their "voices" as absent in Shaw's study, but to make "listening" matter in the sense of materializing the ideals and world envisioned by the feminist bloggers, Shaw turns to ethics rather than the bloggers' practices.[34] Speaking of the limits of civility, or "'respect for difference' as a norm of [liberal] political debate," Shaw writes:

> The possibility of affording equal respect to all parties in a discussion is constituted by power relations and the discursive expectation of particular groups. A self-critical and open aspect in a discussion will go part-way to

[31] Shaw, "The Politics of Blogs: Theories of Discursive Activism Online."
[32] Deem, "Scandal, Heteronormative Culture, and the Disciplining of Feminism," 87.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 44.

> overcoming… barriers to equality, but the assumption that all people in public space will take each other equally seriously in spite of hegemonic discourses and power relations is false. Agonistic democracy, combines with the prospect of an ethics of listening, may provide one solution to this problem. To engage in a politics of difference… there is an ethical imperative to critically examine one's own politically derived norms… This ethical imperative to 'listen across difference' is required to overcome discursive expectations in political discourse, and such an ethics is more at home within an agonistic understanding of democracy.[35]

Shaw's commitment is to decenter liberal public sphere theory so that feminist blogging can be recognized as a form of activism. But she undercuts the force of discursive activism by suggesting women and feminists come to feminist blogs as "listeners" and use the blogs—figured as "safe spaces"—as strongholds in which to discuss matters and concerns already held in common, namely, dissent from and criticism of mainstream conceptions of politics. It remains unclear how and why those who do not already see and practice listening as a political act—including feminists, women and otherwise—might come to do so.

Ethical Agonism & Strategic Radicalism

Shaw's turn to ethics is not unique, although it is one of which Mouffe—whose theoretical work most centrally informs Shaw's own—is skeptical.[36] An ethical imperative to listen may seem to pair well with Mouffe's framing of agonistic "adversaries" as those who "see themselves as belonging to the same political

[35] Ibid., 46.
[36] Chantal Mouffe, "The Ethics and Politics of Democracy: An Agonist Approach," in Greif, Hajo, Weiss, Martin Gerhard, and Österreichische, Ludwig, *Ethics, Society, Politics*, Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society.

association, sharing the same symbolic space."[37] But Mouffe insists that "the establishment of frontiers, the determination of a space of inclusion/exclusion" is properly understood not as ethical but rather as political because such space-making projects always entail boundary-creation, and thus the presence of a "constitutive outside" that inevitably excludes or limits.[38]

Indeed, Shaw might find in the "agonistic respect" of William Connolly—characterized by Mouffe as "another version of pluralistic ethics"—a better support for her turn to ethics.[39] Mouffe suggests that turning to ethics skirts the political "moment of decision:"

> To envisage… a confrontation [between conflicting hegemonic projects] in political, not ethical terms, requires asking a series of strategic questions about the type of 'we' that a given politics aims at creating and the chain of equivalences that is called for.[40]

These strategic questions center on who or what practices will be excluded on contingent and constructed, political grounds.

I am also skeptical of the increasingly central role ethics is imagined to play in materializing a politics that challenges durable structural inequality and global capital.[41] I discuss this ethical turn in Chapter Four, but two observations are called for here. First, the turn to ethics typically retains or incorporates political investments that remain unacknowledged as such, or in any event remain under-theorized. Second, Laclau and Mouffe's enduring interest in strategy may shed light on why many on the radical Left

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[37] Ibid., 318.
[38] Ibid., 323.
[39] Ibid., 323.
[40] Ibid., 323.
[41] Washick and Wingrove, "Politics that Matter: Thinking About Justice and Power with the New Materialists."

might make a turn toward ethics. In the face of the global environmental devastation, durable structural inequality, and durable visions of subjectivity and agency as discrete and sovereign, "strategic" considerations may well seem altogether inadequate to the task.

Put otherwise: when it seems the match is set so that you're always just evading check-mate, one may have more interest in how to change the rules that delimit strategic "chains of equivalence" than in accepting the current terms of play. From this perspective, elaborating an ethics that would alter how people understood their capacities and obligations to others is eminently political. Even so, such an approach raises questions about reception, especially outside academia. In other words, for these ethical visions to matter—to materialize chastened subjects who embrace the non-sovereign agents in practice and not only in theory—we need an account of the ways in which the imagined worlds and new conceptions of agency and responsibility posited might be picked up.

I am more interested in the positive affect that attaches to such ethical visions, at times bluntly contrasted with a wounded, identitarian politics.[42] This might have something to do with what Mouffe characterizes as using ethics to avoid the political moment where something is expelled, or deemed unacceptable. And yet, it is not clear to me that Mouffe's strategic outlook would not likewise cast bad affect as an obstruction. As the saying goes (and as feminists using CMC have been advised for decades): you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

Here it is helpful to return to a point gestured at earlier via Shaw: though

[42] Rosi Braidotti, "Affirmation Versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates."

language is seemingly central to Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic theory, they do little to attend to the particular operations of language in situated speech contexts. Yes, we can see how articulating and countering claims, using analogy and metaphor to recast old issues in a new light have been central to the rearticulation of freedom and equality. But we are less able to account for how and when such speech acts are, to use J. L. Austin's terms, "felicitous" and when others were not.[43] We might say that language largely functions by analogy to illustrate the ways in which political identities, movements, communities are (re)constructed in relation to each other in the political field of discourse.

As a result, the theoretical account that enables us to explicate how a historical hegemony was articulated and disarticulated may be less well suited to help us identify those practices that would generate—as Laclau and Mouffe certainly work toward—a broad Left counter-hegemonic project. To the extent Laclau and Mouffe—and those who take up their theory—allow the existing rules of play and of players to dictate sound strategy, they may even obscure the sorts of outcomes they seek. What I will call a poetic approach to the study of online public discourse, one that centers the cultivation of speaking subjects and the materialization of ideals of public speech, is better suited to such challenges.

IV. The Poetics of Public Address

As with Habermas's critics and those, like Shaw, who have brought radical democratic theory to bear on the study of CMC, Michael Warner is invested in

[43] J. L. Austin, "How to Do Things with Words."

decentering liberal public sphere theory. However his work focuses more broadly on theorizing publics, understood as peculiarly modern phenomena by which strangers are constituted as particular sorts of subjects and/of imagined collectives by means of indefinite address. In Warner's work, a public is as "poetic world making."[44] In saying this, Warner is highlighting that the scene making of public address, or its capacity to cultivate the subjects and collectives it presumes to already exist through generic form, style, mode of delivery, protocols, and the content of discursive claims.

In Warner words: "Public discourse says not only 'Let a public exist,' but 'Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.'"[45] Thus, these protocols, modes of circulation, and claims anticipate and shape not only who could possibly receive the address but also whose speech will be recognized as a legitimate contribution to "public" discourse. In other words, publics undergird and are productive of particular relations of power, creating and recreating worlds and subjects where some are figured as reasonable, and articulate, while others are figured as emotional and their speech incoherent or absurd. Typically, Warner continues, the poetic function of publics is not only obscured by the constitutive presumption of a public's existence embedded in public address—that is, public address presumes the audience it creates—but also by "the dominant tradition of the public sphere."[46]

Warner's study of the ideologization of print in revolutionary America offers insight into what a poetic approach to the study of feminist CMC looks like, directing us to consider the historical, technological, and rhetorical dimensions of public sphere

[44] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublic*, 114.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 114-115.

communication that are critical to understanding its particular, political possibilities and manifestations.[47] So, for example—and contrary to the pervasive common sense conception of print as "disembodied"—Warner demonstrates that early U.S. colonists had an entirely different notion of being public and publishing. In this earlier ideologization, the contiguity of hand and paper, of going to print and public circulation, were conceived of as an *extension* of presence, a means by which a person could expand the scope of his personal visitation.

Following Warner, I ask by what means, by what rhetorical overtures and practices, embedded and enabled by what designed elements of CMC, has the "disembodiment" of online public speech been materialized? What practices does the ideologization of CMC as disembodied cultivate? And, finally, by what means might a counter-public practice contest by supplanting that ideologization with another? In the context of CMC this requires one to attend to the built form of CMC public spaces, as well as the rhetorical practices and discourses that tell us something about the strangers we might expect to encounter online, and how we are able and expected to act.

Design and Affordances

Attending to the public "spaces" of CMC requires attention to the built design of different platforms and the ways in which they support or constrain action. The term "affordances" is helpful here. Coined by perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson, affordances describe the possibilities for action that a particular environment "*offers* the

[47] Warner, *The Letters of the Republic.*

[actor], what it *provides* or *furnishes*."[48] For example, in my office, a chair affords sitting (but also standing on if I have need to reach a book on a top shelf); pens and paper afford writing (which affords communicating); a computer, screen, mouse and keyboard afford typing, communicating across distance, researching, and many other things. Affordances highlight the relational nature of action: sitting, writing, typing and so on are actions I (have the opportunity to) undertake with objects in my environment.

Thinking through affordances also suggests that the value perceived in objects and the environment reflects a particular perspective. For example, while brush-covered ground affords walking, a cleared path affords the same, but also speed, ease, the use of carts, and so on for humans. However, brush-covered ground afforded shelter, nutrients, and so on for other species. The positive value many would ascribe the path presumes a human's perspective, and perhaps also some dogs.

Working with CMC platforms, I am concerned with human perspectives; nonetheless, in digital environments (but certainly also others), not all human actors have the same knowledge or means with which to discern or make use of an affordance. Indeed, as taken up by Donald Norman and, through him, human-computer interaction (HCI), the term affordance often delimits *perceived* affordances, the perception of which is influenced by design, convention and, I would add, expert knowledge.[49]

By way of example, consider the embedded link, that is, a hyperlink appearing in the body of digital text that, when clicked, navigates to or opens another website containing referenced or otherwise relevant information. Assuming they are functional,

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[48] James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances" (1979), in *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, edited by Jen Jack Gieseking, William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low and Susan Gaegert

[49] D. Norman, "Affordances and Design," *Interactions* 6, no. 3 (1999): pp. 38-43.

an embedded link always affords navigation to the linked page and a computer mouse always affords clicking. However, it is the distinct (designed and learned) appearance of an embedded hyperlink, denoted by a different color font and underlined when a mouse hovers over it, that indicates "that clicking on that location is a meaningful, useful action to perform."[50] In researching feminist uses of CMC platforms, both affordances and the ease with which they are perceived, utilized, and adapted will matter.

In a digital environment (as in many others), affordances are the product of design and built into software; in other words, they could be otherwise. As with other technology, Norman notes that designed affordances of digital interfaces reflect "culture." He seems to take "culture" as unified, but we can imagine instead multiple, competing cultures. Though the product of design, affordances of CMC often come to be experienced as necessity. The fact that altering a digital environment to change its affordances can be exceedingly difficult, both technically and because it flies in the face of what already is, compounds this experienced sense of necessity (see discussion of moderation in Chapter Two). In this sense, attending to the built design of CMC allows me to elaborate how design can both reinforce a dominant culture and appear inevitable or even necessary.

A Poetic Approach to Feminist CMC

In the context of Shaw's study and my own analysis of feminist blogging, a poetic approach to the study of feminist CMC directs us to consider "listening" as a practice of publicity variously constrained and enabled by ideals of public speech and built

[50] Norman, "Affordances and Design," p. 1.

environments that reflect or contest such ideals. How, one might ask, do feminist blogs cultivate subjects who listen, who understand listening to be a political act, and who—in the "safe spaces" of feminist blogs—demand that both readers and speakers "listen?" Understood as an expectation to move outside one's own experience in order to gain an awareness of structural conditions which shape that experience, "listening" subjects might be cultivated by feminist bloggers providing and enforcing a comment policy (discussed in Chapter Three).

Because the blogs which enable feminists to create online "safe spaces" are taken as given in Shaw's account, we also lose sight of the prior activism of feminists—discursive and always also material—to create new moderation tools and common practices that made it possible for feminist practices of counter-publicity to "go public" online: to not be propelled into CMC deemed private, and to take the form of formally open-access forums.[51]

Attending to practices of feminist CMC over thirty years, I find that feminist speech continues to be "received" by many as "complaint," despite widely different manifestations over time and across different CMC platforms. I want to suggest that this is not necessarily indicative of the ineffectiveness or capture of feminist speech and/as political action, but it is rather indicative of, to use Joan Scott's terms, the "paradoxes" of feminist speech.[52] Rather than get too caught up in the reception of feminist CMC as complaint, we should as Melissa Deem suggests, consider by what means complaint

[51] While Shaw is correct to identify how a liberal imperative to "include" all contributions is used to frame feminist blogs as anti-democratic, it is nonetheless the case that "safe spaces" are formally open-access.
[52] Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*.

becomes "dangerous."[53]

On this point, it is helpful to keep in mind Sara Ahmed's work on the "feelings of structure," or the ways feelings enable "structures to get under our skins."[54] Ahmed argues the circulation or obstruction of good feelings is party to the cultivation of subjects who are viscerally drawn to particular visions and practices of "happy" political subjects—no matter how theoretically or practically bankrupt—and repulsed by alternatives.[55] Attending to affectively charged responses to the "safe spaces" of contemporary feminist blogging, I suggest feminist CMC may enable a dangerous form of complaint by cultivating what I term a feminized subject whose obligation to strangers addressed extends beyond good intentions to encompass an awareness of durable structural inequality.

V. Outline of the Dissertation

My first chapter ("Cultivating 'the Real' Cyberspace: The Ontopolitics of Computer-Mediated Communication") explores how Cyberspace came to be understood as a space for the public at large, rather than the exclusive domain of elites and geeks. This development hinged on ontologizing, or giving an account of the fundamental nature of, both Cyberspace and the speaking subject who would appear there. Drawing on early (1990s) accounts of "the electronic frontier," I show how establishing the irrelevance of embodied particularity and vulnerability was central to ontological imaginaries of Cyberspace.

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[53] Deem, "From Bobbitt to SCUM: Re-memberment, Scatological Rhetorics, and Feminist Strategies in the Contemporary United States," 532.
[54] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 216.
[55] Ibid.

The disembodiment of Cyberspace speakers has been addressed by others (e.g., Rosi Braidotti, Vivian Sobchack)[56]; unaddressed, however, are important differences in what disembodiment was understood to enable. Some envisioned online disembodiment as a means by which a liberal public might be perfected; others favored a vision of Cyberspace as a theater of the imagination, restricted only by what an individual could code. I refer to these as liberal and libertarian practices of publicity online.

In reconstructing these alternative visions, I show how initial commitments (as well as resistance) to "civilizing" Cyberspace were transformed by what was increasingly presented as online "violence." Central in this regard is Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" and responses to it, where the embodied and vulnerable status of "virtual" subjects was debated in deeply gendered (and quite uncivil) terms. The upshot, I argue, was the re-articulation of a liberal conception of public speech as both ideal and impossible owing to the empirical dominance of a libertarian practice. The result was a diminished sense of the value and effects of online speech.

In Chapter Two (""Unconventional' Women and the Paradoxes of Early Feminist CMC") I draw from digital archives to trace the halting appearance of a feminist practice of counter-publicity on Usenet, a non-centralized CMC network credited with shaping how social media is conceived and designed. I highlight two key moments in this early history. First, I examine how feminist speech was initially shunted into modes of CMC deemed private (e.g., mailing lists), where embodiment and vulnerability might be properly contained. This development left intact practices of publicity premised on disembodiment, to which women had tenuous access.

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[56] Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference"; Sobchack, "New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading Mondo 2000," in Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.*

I then elaborate the fragility of the promise of disembodied speech in considering a second moment: the unruly speech of an individual, transgender feminist provocateur whose attempts to speak online "without regard to gender" were met with strong resistance, including banishment from several CMC platforms. The chapter concludes by exploring subsequent efforts by feminists on Usenet to create new moderation tools and practices, affordances designed to enable feminist speech to "go public."

My third chapter ("Embodying Public Speech: The Feminist Politics of Safety Online") takes up the "safe spaces" of contemporary feminist blogs and the un- or even anti-democratic practices their creation and maintenance entail. Rooted in feminist traditions of consciousness-raising, online safe spaces raise a set of familiar concerns: specifically, that the aspiration for "safety" marks a withdrawal from the risky work of politics or functions as a cudgel to silence intra-feminist critique in the name of solidarity.

Drawing on what Judith Butler terms the "social ontology" of the body, I suggest that the creation and maintenance of online safe spaces constitute a counter-public practice that figures the democratic subject as embodied, vulnerable, and entangled in relations of obligation; this figuration contests both empirically dominant libertarian and normatively dominant liberal practices of publicity online. Within these safe spaces, feminist bloggers appropriate affective stances associated with authoritative public discourse, notably mocking contempt, which they direct towards dominant practices of publicity premised on disembodied speakers. In these ways feminist bloggers can be seen as embracing the risky world of politics, inviting but also demanding participants to practice different ways to be and speak in public.

A final chapter ("On 'Trigger Warnings': Tough Subjects, Revolting Subjects, and The Publicization of Structural Harm") takes the recent migration of "trigger warnings" (TWs) from online to offline spaces as an inroad for exploring the reception of a vision and practices of a feminized democratic subject. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's work on the politics of emotion, I argue that TWs threaten the positive affect of sturdy, resilient speakers that signals "fitting" participants in online speech and classrooms, if not also politics, broadly conceived. I conclude by staging an encounter with contemporary theorists who envision affirming, ethical self-cultivation as a means to dethrone what Stephen White terms modernity's "Teflon subject." I propose online feminists cultivate a democratic subject not unlike the one that recent political theory has sought to cultivate via affirming visions of ethical life. Shaped by challenging, even uncomfortable, negotiations of "safety" and its failures, the feminized democratic subject of feminist blogging, I argue, is less fragile in the face of the bad feelings that make coalition-building so challenging. In line with research on unconscious bias and white fragility, the reception of TWs suggests the staying power of the modern, independent, autonomous democratic subject owes in part to a visceral, affectively charged rejection of alternatives experienced as "killjoys."[57]

[57] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness.*

CHAPTER ONE

CULTIVATING "THE REAL" IN CYBERSPACE: THE ONTOPOLITICS OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

I. Introduction

In 1993 journalist Julian Dibbell stumbled upon a discussion of "virtual rape" in a corner of Cyberspace called LambdaMOO. Struck by the seeming misnomer and sincerity with which it was applied, Dibbell sought out "the facts" of the virtual rape and closely followed ongoing discussions, eventually publishing an article on the subject in the *Village Voice*.[1] Dibbell opens the article, titled "A Rape in Cyberspace," by asking his readers to:

> shut [their] ears momentarily to the techno-utopian ecstasies of West Coast hippies and look without illusion upon the present possibilities for building, in the on-line spaces of this world, societies more decent and free than those mapped onto dirt and concrete and capital… to behold the new bodies awaiting us in virtual space undazzled by their phantom powers, and to get to the crucial work of sorting out the socially meaningful differences between those bodies and our physical ones.[2]

All this must be done in order to "wrap our late-modern ontologies, epistemologies, sexual ethics, and common sense around the curious notion of rape" in Cyberspace,

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[1] Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace: How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society," *The Village Voice*, December 21 1993, 36-42, 37. Slightly different versions of Dibbell's article would be republished several times, including in early edited volumes on cyberspace and CMC (See: Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourses of Cyberculture*). Dibbell offers an extended account of his time spent on LambdaMOO in *My Tiny Life*.

[2] Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace."

which might function—as it would for Dibbell—to "unsettl[e]… the way [he] looked at the rest of the world."[3]

Undoubtedly, John Perry Barlow—co-founder of the still-extant Electronic Frontier Foundation—was one of the West Coast hippies Dibbell would like his readers to shut out, at least for a moment.[4] In what would become an iconic early missive on computer-mediated communication (CMC) Barlow mused, that "the opening of Cyberspace" had resulted in "humanity… undergoing the most profound transformation of its history."[5] Barlow continued: "Coming into the Virtual World, we inhabit Information. Indeed, we become Information. Thought is embodied and the Flesh is made Word. It's weird as hell."[6] Barlow would go on to write of Cyberspace as the next frontier of human civilization.

Dibbell and Barlow's rhetoric may seem outlandish in our contemporary moment, where CMC is common—even ubiquitous—in much of the world, and yet humanity seems much the same, for better or worse. In the early 1990s, however, this language would not have seemed so bizarre to the mostly U.S. American audience it was intended for, or rather its bizarreness would have been matched by that which it described, namely: increased access to computer-mediated communication and its conceptualization as a space for "the public." This chapter returns to this extended moment in an effort to tease out the stakes of the differences between Dibbell and

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[3] Ibid.
[4] In "Crime and Puzzlement," Barlow groups himself with "techno-hippies," a group contrasted with "cyberpunks."
[5] John Perry Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement," Electric Frontier Foundation, June 8, 1990, https://w2.eff.org/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/HTML/crime_and_puzzlement_1.html, (accessed March 23, 2015). Portions of "Crime and Puzzlement" were first published to The WELL, a bulletin board service.
[6] Ibid.

Barlow, and the import of their shared imaginary of computer-mediated communication as a world apart—what was called "Cyberspace." This retrospective inquiry better positions us to understand and evaluate the democratic possibilities of online public discourse, both then and now.

I argue that *ontologized* accounts that attributed a fundamental nature to both Cyberspace and the speaking subject who would appear there enabled CMC to serve as a site of consolidation for a disembodied democratic subject at a time when this familiar modern vision was under increasing worldly duress. Drawing on accounts of "the electronic frontier" in early 1990s print media and online forums, I show how establishing the irrelevance of embodied particularity and vulnerability was central to ontological imaginaries of Cyberspace.

The disembodiment of Cyberspace speakers has been noted by others[7]; unaddressed, however, are important differences in what disembodiment was understood to enable. While some envisioned disembodiment as a means by which Habermas's liberal public might be perfected, others refused the expectation of sincere and civil communication this implied, favoring a "cyberpunk" vision of Cyberspace as a theater for individual expression and imagination, restricted only by what an individual could imagine or code.

In reconstructing these alternative visions, I show how initial commitments (as well as resistance) to civilizing Cyberspace were transformed by what was increasingly presented as online violence. Central in this regard is Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" and responses to it, where the embodied and vulnerable status of virtual

[7] Rosi Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference"; Vivian Sobchack, "New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading Mondo 2000," in Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.*

subjects was debated in deeply gendered (and quite uncivil) terms. The upshot, I argue, was the re-articulation of a liberal conception of public speech online as ideal and in perpetual deferment. One effect of this re-articulation was a diminished sense of the meaning, efficacy, and even "realness" of public CMC, which repeatedly fell short of an ideal many thought it was uniquely suited to realize.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In Section Two, I survey the theoretical framework that supports my analysis. Section Three provides a short survey of public computer-mediated communication framed as "Cyberspace." Sections Four and Five trouble a monolithic account of Cyberspace, illustrating how contestation over this space played out by reference to distinct accounts of the fundamental nature of the world CMC offered, and thus of the different modes of "being" online and relations to strangers one encountered there that could be cultivated. I close by discussing why I believe turning to CMC and the onto-imaginaries that have narrated its incorporation into our lives offers important sites of analysis for those interested in what William Connolly has called "less stingy" visions of the democratic subject.[8]

II. Ontologized Subjects

My approach represents an attempt to bring public sphere literature in conversation with that of contemporary theorists concerned with ontological accounts of the subject and conditions of her socio-political existence. The former has mostly moved from qualified enthusiasm to brooding skepticism regarding CMC's democratic potential—a perspective reflected in Western popular discourse—with the noted

[8] Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*.

exception of CMC's use in non-democratic countries.[9] However, these assessments are haunted by the durable specter of Jürgen Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. In other words, they tend to take as given that this public represents the proper or ideal form of *democratic* public discourse, bemoaning the "fragmentation" of the public or failure of a "general public" to coalesce and operate as a limit to national government.[10] Other accounts, like Jodi Dean's *Blog Theory*, expressly eschew Habermas's ideal public, but nonetheless produce an account—not unlike Habermas's—of the near-total capture of citizens' attention by commercial interests.[11]

It is here that I find it helpful to think with political theorists interested in socio-political ontologies of the human, as they direct us to consider what is being presumed as "real." At the same time, this literature has had little to do with CMC to date. This strikes me as a missed opportunity, given the role of public discourse in shaping and materializing the modern ontology—including the masterful, self-directed, self-interested democratic subject—that this literature is interested in dethroning, not to mention CMC's importance as a contemporary form of networked entanglement.[12]

My source material directs me to consider ontology as well: in speaking of the "nature" of Cyberspace, public figures like Barlow rely upon and construct an imaginary of CMC and those using it that envisages new ways of being. Working primarily with mainstream print media I tease out competing ontologized accounts of Cyberspace, that

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[9] This exception is unsurprising if we understand a Habermasian model to be the presumed backdrop.
[10] Fraser, "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World"; Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, 31.
[11] Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, 4. I am not unsympathetic to Dean's analysis, however, she remains at an unhelpful level of abstraction, rarely working with the prose of those bloggers she figures as a monolithic group decidedly under the thumb of "communicative capitalism."
[12] Particular imagined collectivities (e.g., "The Republic of Letters") and physical communicative sites (e.g., the salon) were importantly constitutive of the modern subject.

is, accounts which posit particular visions of CMC and those using it as "real." These "ontopolitical imaginaries"—or simply: onto-imaginaries[13]—underpin different political projects and hail different figures of the democratic subject. For example, whether or not "a rape in Cyberspace" is taken to be nonsense, a misnomer that diminishes "real" sexual assault, or an obvious harm requiring collective action, will turn on the question of the "nature" of Cyberspace.

The term onto-imaginary is meant to capture an account of what is fundamental that draws from the always also discursive matter of being human—lived experience, practices, institutions, built environments, encounters with human and nonhuman others—and shapes what we make of this matter, where "make of" speaks to both "understanding" and "materializing."[14] Onto-imaginaries offer conceptual and aesthetic frameworks, calling attention to what "makes sense," but also what does or does not "feel right." Finally, ontological imaginaries are partial—referencing some matter and not others—and so also political. To the extent they are picked up, an onto-imaginary may

[13]The term ontopolitical imaginaries is also intended to signal my engagement with scholars interested in ontology considered in relation to the human *qua* meaning-making animal, especially William E. Connolly's "ontopolitical interpretation" (Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*). Connolly's ontopolitical interpretation highlights the fact that political claims and interpretation always rest, however surreptitiously or uncomfortably, on a vision of what exists or must be presumed to exist. By contrast, ontopolitical *imaginaries* begin from more or less overt accounts of "nature," teasing out the political projects and modes of being human they might or do support. In the context of burgeoning CMC publics, baldly asserted onto-imaginaries relayed something of what to expect, what to feel, how to behave, and how to evaluate the words and behaviors of others "online." Other works that have been influential in shaping my use of this term: White, *Sustaining Affirmations: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* and Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, *Theory*. Jane Bennett helpfully encapsulates this term in a critical exchange of which I was a part. Bennett, "Ontology, Sensibility, and Action," 82-89.

[14] A fair amount has been said about the metaphors that framed and accompanied the development of the early public Internet. Mostly stemming from communication and (new) media studies and legal scholarship, this literature has done a great deal to illustrate the ways in which different metaphors shape the built design of the CMC (an information superhighway should be fast), ease of use and access (for the metaphor of information superhighway to be meaningful I must have some familiarity with large highways), legislation, and even users' expectations (on a superhighway, I and many others swiftly move toward our own destinations, not communicating or coordinating much).

stand in for "the real," and so delimit the possible as well as the coherence of some lived experiences.

Central to the political work of onto-imaginaries is the management of a certain fundamental vulnerability of being human. Note here that I am not speaking of an *imagined* vulnerability*,* but am making a very general ontological claim, namely that, to be human is to be vulnerable: to the worldly conditions one is born into, to death. Here, I am in good company. This vulnerability is captured by Arendt's non-sovereign human actor who is, as Linda Zerilli says, "a beginner," and who would be paralyzed without the capacity to forgive because of a fundamental unpredictability of words and action taking place amongst others with whom we share the world.[15] Drawing from Arendt, Patchen Markell has described this fundamental facet of being human as resulting from "[t]he fact of human finitude… interpret[ed] not in terms of morality, but rather in terms of the practical limits imposed upon us by the openness and unpredictability of the future."[16] I also want to draw in thinkers whose discussion of fundamental human vulnerability is not oriented primarily towards the future, those—like Charles Taylor, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway—who identify the ways in which being human means that one is always already dependent upon others and shaped by the material-semiotic practices and institutions that produce the recognizable, the normal, the real.

As others have illustrated, a modern onto-imaginary manages human vulnerability by displacing it from the democratic subject—imagined in his purest forms as a disembodied expression of reason—onto the bodies of disparaged Others.[17] That this is,

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[15] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*.
[16] Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 5.
[17] See discussions in White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, and Brown, *States of Injury*.

in some sense, a grossly insincere onto-imaginary does not mean that it is detached from the real matter of being human. The strength of this onto-imaginary—as with any onto-imaginary—is in its uptake, that is, in its being lived and built into our practices, institutions, the material and immaterial structures we move in, common sense, and so on. To that end, throughout this analysis I aim to take seriously what makes the "fantastical" durable, lived, and felt as real.

My primary sites for observing visions and practices of the democratic subject are CMC, and its early adopters, emissaries, and malcontents. By looking to onto-imaginaries and situating myself in public sphere scholarship, I seek to explain the ways CMC cultivates fundamental—felt and lived—understandings of ourselves and the relationship among our bodies, words, and those of the strangers we address. Contrary to what we might expect, the fact that these understandings—these onto-imaginaries—transcend CMC is not challenged but illustrated by the now commonplace sense of a sharp distinction between on- and offline realities, with the former generally considered to fall short of "the real." Put otherwise, I do not take the demarcation between on- and offline reality as given, but rather constructed and contested. This is not to say that there are no distinctions between, for example, face-to-face conversations and CMC, but rather that the meaning attributed to these distinctions is not given, but shaped through onto-imaginaries, selectively—politically—drawing from some experiences and not others. As will be seen, the demarcation between online activity and real life was far less certain in the early 1990s, when Cyberspace was commonly depicted as a literal space in which humanity might appear to itself, undivided by material insecurity and politicized identities.

III. Cyberspace: An Introduction

While we may now think of "Cyberspace" as simply a dated term for "the Internet," in the 1990s it more narrowly encompassed sites of interactive, formally open-access computer-mediated communication.[18] At the heart of the early public CMC—its figuration in mainstream print media and its digital manifestation—were online forums, notably Usenet's newsgroups and the "conferences" hosted on Bulletin Board Services (BBSs), and Multi-User Domains or Dungeons (MUDs), like LamdbaMOO, which supported real-time interactive role-playing.[19]

Both forums and MUDs were initially entirely text-based. What this means in the case of forums is probably clear; for example, participants were not able to upload a photo to associate with their username or "handle."

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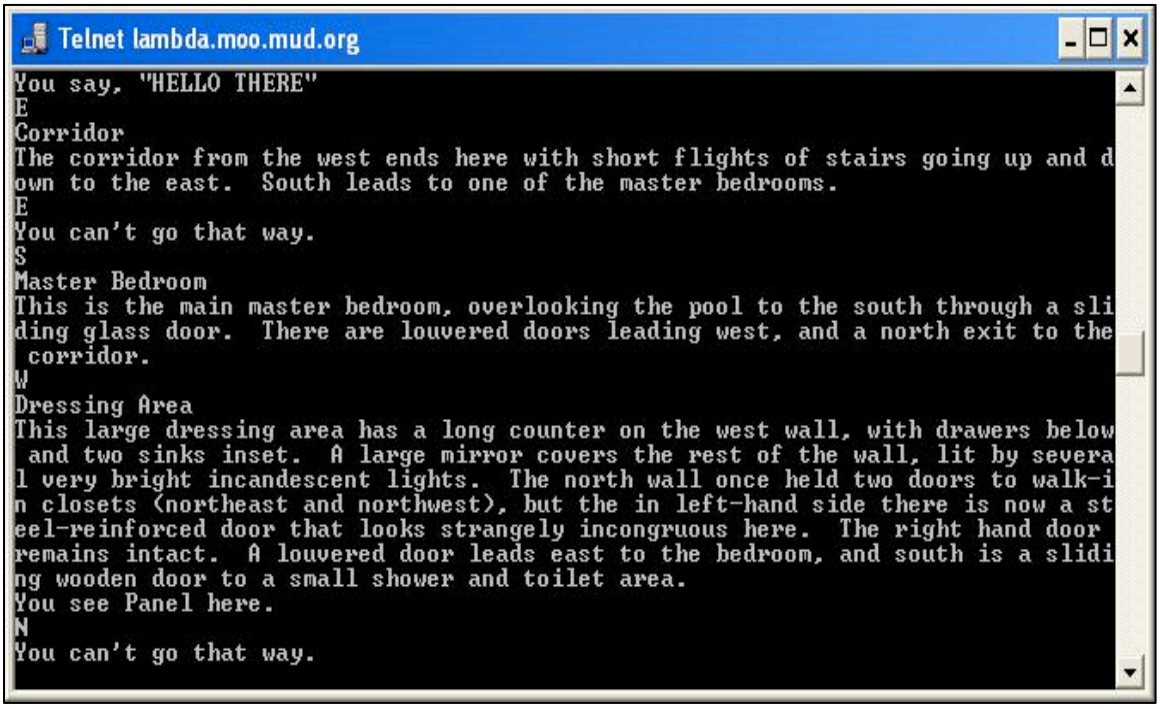
[18] Brian A. Connery provides a typical example of the way Cyberspace was distinguished from the Internet and, before the latter's dominance, other infrastructure supporting CMC: "And debates continue—at the national level regarding the Internet itself… and within the cyberspace of newsgroups and discussion lists…" in "IMHO: Authority and Egalitarian Rhetoric in the Virtual Coffeehouse," in Porter, *Internet Culture*, 171. See also: Annette N. Markham, "Metaphors Reflecting and Shaping the Reality of the Internet: Tool, Place, Way of Being" (paper presented at the Association of Internet Researchers Conference, Toronto, Canada, October 16-19, 2003), http://markham.internetinquiry.org/writing/MarkhamTPW.pdf.

[19] A distinction is generally made between online forums and MUDs in the type of public discourse they facilitated. MUDs are understood to have primarily supported synchronous or "real-time" communication. One effect of how this was conceived is that the MUD kept no record of public conversations, or more accurately, narratives of the words and actions of participants—one had to "be there" as a conversation unfolded in order to participate. By contrast, while roughly synchronous communication could unfold on a BBS, these primarily supported asynchronous public communication, meaning that—barring deletion or "freezing" of commenting—one could respond to a conversation thread begun days, weeks, or even years later. Charging for minutes of usage added to the asynchronous feel of forums as many would log off when composing a response in order to minimize cost. However, this distinction breaks down some because MUDS had forum-like boards and both BBSs and MUDs typically supported (synchronous) chat and (asynchronous) email conversations that were private insofar as directed to particular, invited, or addressed individuals. It was also not atypical for the contents of an email to be posted as a contribution to public conversation. See: Peter Kollack and Marc A. Smith, "Communities in Cyberspace," in Smith and Kollack, *Communities in Cyberspace*, and first-hand accounts cited throughout this chapter.

In the context of a MUD, participants created an avatar by choosing a name and writing a description that other users could see and then navigating environments (e.g., LamdbaMOO's many-roomed mansion) described entirely by text, as in a book.

FIGURE 1: Screenshot of the Object-Oriented MUD, LambdaMOO.[20]



Retroactively, we might call these "social media"—indeed, some have[21]—but that term overlooks a dimension that mattered a great deal at the time: Cyberspace understood as a meaningfully distinct place, a different plane of being in which we, too, might be fundamentally different.

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[20] Screenshot from Aula, "LambdaMOO," *MMOs Through My Eyes*, http://cultureofmmos.blogspot.com/2010/04/lambdamoo.html, (accessed December 20, 2015). The letters "E," "S," "W," and "N" indicate directions the user walked or attempted to walk

[21] Adam Estes, "The Well, One of the Earliest Social Networks, Is Facing Destruction," *Motherboard*, July 4, 2012, http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/social-networks-just-aren-t-what-they-used-to-be (accessed February 22, 2015); John K. Waters, *The Everything Guide to Social Media*. Those familiar with the "choose your own adventure" genre of children's books might find it helpful to think of a MUD as such, as there were parameters to these environments (e.g., walking south, by typing "S," was only possible in a MUD building if there was a hall or room built into the design south of one's location). Likewise, the actions of other characters were not pre-determined but unfold, along with one's own actions, in real-time.

Experiences or first-hand accounts of public CMC were crucial to conveying the sense that Cyberspace afforded new spaces for being and interacting with others. For many, a BBS called the WELL, or a detailed account of another's experience thereof, would serve as a first introduction to Cyberspace.

The WELL, or Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, was founded in 1985 by Larry Brilliant and Stewart Brand of *Whole Earth Catalog* fame.[22] It was, as the connection to Brand might suggest, a stronghold of the West Coast hippies Dibbell referenced and a font (one is tempted to say "WELLspring") of cyber-utopian thought. WELL members paid a monthly subscription ranging from $8 to $15 and, through the mid-1990s, an additional hourly rate to read and post in online forums called "conferences."[23] Conferences covered a range of interests—politics, Grateful Dead songs, computers, sexuality, and WELL policies—which members were expected to participate in using their real names.[24]

The WELL powerfully shaped the discourse that accompanied increased access to CMC platforms beyond the elite spheres of the university, military, and tech industry in the early through mid-1990s.[25] Its cultural clout can be traced in part to its base in the

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[22] Hafner, *The Well: A Story of Love, Death & Real Life in the Seminal Online Community*. For an early and much abbreviated version: Katie Hafner, "The Epic Saga of The Well: The World's Most Influential Online Community (And It's Not AOL)" *Wired* 5 no. 5 (May 1997), http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/5.05/ff_well_pr.html.

[23] Ron Pernick, "A Timeline of the First 10 Years on the WELL," *The WELL*, 1995, http://www.well.com/conf/welltales/timeline.html (accessed August 12, 2014).

[24] The WELL—still in existence today—also has several "private" conferences, to which one must request and be granted access. Of particular note interest for my research is the Women on the Well (WOW) conference, which requires that prospective members speak with a conference host or administrator in order to audibly "verify" that one is a woman.

[25] The Internet's predecessor, ARPANET, was funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, and developed at university and military research labs. Outside these venues, employment in the tech industry, centered around the San Francisco Bay Area, could provide access to CMC platforms. Access continued to be restricted to these venues—the state, the university, the tech industry, and those connected to them—until the emergence of commercial service providers in the late 1980s. These were not limited to

San Francisco Bay Area, the heartland of CMC development.[26] As such, WELL members were far more likely to be called upon as experts, or to position themselves as experts to old media outlets who were playing catch-up. Indeed, several early edited volumes on the Internet that included accounts of the WELL were also edited by WELL members.[27] Additionally, the WELL offered free access to journalists.[28] The result was the dissemination of dozens of first-hand accounts of the WELL and of Cyberspace from the perspective of WELL members. These appeared in mainstream print media including *The New York Times*, *Harper's Magazine* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*; burgeoning digital cultures print media such as *Wired*; scholarly journals; edited volumes, and even several dedicated books.[29]

IV. Cyberspace as the Frontier of Human Civilization

"Crime and Puzzlement," the piece from which Barlow is quoted above, offers an account of the events that led to his co-founding the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), which promised to "raise and disburse funds for education, lobbying, and

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Internet service providers (ISPs), but rather included bulletin board services like the WELL, which provided members with an email account, homepage, in addition to the more widely discussed forums or "conferences." By the early 1990s ISPs had become the most common means of accessing CMC platforms, including BBSs.

[26] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*.

[27] For example: Dery, *Flame Wars*; Ludlow and Godwin, *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier*.

[28] Hafner, *The Well: A Story of Love, Death & Real Life in the Seminal Online Community*.

[29] For example (in chronological order): Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier*; Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*; Dery, *Flame Wars*; Brook and Boal, *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information*; Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*; Leeson, *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*; Ludlow and Godwin, *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier*.; Cherny and Weise, *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, edited by Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise; Seabrook, *Deeper: Adventures on the Net*; Hafner, "The Epic Saga of The Well: The World's Most Influential Online Community (And It's Not AOL)"; Hafner, *The Well: A Story of Love, Death & Real Life in the Seminal Online Community*; Fred Turner, "Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy: The WELL and the origins of virtual community," *Technology and Culture* 46, no. 3 (2005), 485-512; Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*.

litigation in the areas relating to digital speech and the extension of the [U.S.] Constitution into Cyberspace."[30] However, a close reading suggests that "Crime and Puzzlement" was the first in a series of attempts to resolve a fundamental tension between two different Cyberspace onto-imaginaries: Cyberspace as a theater for individual expression and play, and Cyberspace as the frontier of human civilization.

This tension is captured in the opening of "Crime and Puzzlement," in which readers are introduced to two decidedly suspicious characters in a WELL conference on hacking that had been organized by *Harper's Magazine*. It was the use of pseudonyms that marked these characters—Acid Phreak and Phiber Optik—as suspicious on the WELL, where the norm (and, technically, the requirement) was for user accounts to be made using one's real name. Even if one posted pseudonymously, posts were linked to public user profiles which were supposed to provide one's real names; Acid Phreak and Phiber Optik did not comply with this expectation and it was this in the context of the hacker conference that earned them the label of "crackers."[31] Short for computer-cracker, "cracker" was

[30] Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement."

[31] The role of anonymity and pseudonymity in CMC is more complicated than typically presented. Feminist critiques of the presumptively disembodied, masculine-gendered subject of Cyberspace can overstate the prevalence of anonymity and what it signified. For example, Lisa Nakamura writes: "The ability to participate anonymously or, as was and remains far more common, pseudonymously was an integral part of why Barlow and other net utopians saw the Internet as valuable" (Nakamura, "Afterword: Blaming, Shaming, and the Feminization of Social Media," in Magnet and Rachel Dubrofsky, *Feminist Surveillance Studies*). Anonymity or pseudonymity would be offered as solutions to problems of inequality recast as problems of reception (see, for example, Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, Chapter One, http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/1.html). But, as Barlow's depiction of Acid Phreak and Phiber Optik suggests, anonymity and pseudonymity also signified suspicious, even nefarious characters. What's more, pseudonymity—which Nakamura notes was far more common than anonymity in early CMC—came to be powerfully associated with cisgendered men adopting a virtual gendered identity other than that with which they identified for expressly nefarious ends. This iconization likely owed to high-profile accounts like that of "Alex," a cisgendered man, who represented himself as a severely disabled woman name Joan Sue Greene, as part of an experiment to "see what it felt like to be female, and to experience the intimacy of female friendship," which included "pressuring" women for virtual sex and using "Joan" to set himself up on dates (Lindsy van Gelder, "The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover," *Ms. Magazine* (Oct. 1985). This is part of the story behind the "rule of the Internet" which says "there are no girls on

used to describe a subset of hackers who used their expertise for vaguely nefarious purposes—perhaps just for fun, perhaps to gain access to private information for personal gain.

Later, the nefarious character of Acid Phreak and Phiber Optik seemed confirmed via their differentiation from Barlow and the other "techno-hippies" who were willing to adhere to a code and participate in civil discussion:

> After several days of strained diplomacy, the discussion settled into a moral debate on the ethics of security and went critical. The techno-hippies were of the unanimous opinion that, in Dylan's words, one "must be honest to live outside the law." But these young strangers apparently lived by no code save those with which they unlocked forbidden regions of the Net…
>
> Civility broke down. We began to see exchanges like:
>
> Dave Hughes: Clifford Stoll said a wise thing that no one has commented on. That networks are built on trust. If they aren't, they should be.
>
> Acid Phreak: Yeah. Sure. And we should use the 'honor system' as a first line of security against hack attempts.
>
> Jef Poskanzer: This guy down the street from me sometimes leaves his back door unlocked. I told him about it once, but he still does it. If I had the chance to do it over, I would go in the back door, shoot him, and take all his money and consumer electronics. It's the only way to get through to him.
>
> Acid Phreak: Jef Poskanker (Puss? Canker? yechh) Anyway, now
> when did you first start having these delusions where computer hacking was even *remotely* similar to murder?

The "breakdown" here refers to Acid Phreak's abrupt, contemptuous dismissal of Hughes' comment, followed Poskanzer's sarcastic extension of Acid Phreak's response to the "real world," and finally, name-calling on the part of Acid Phreak.

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the Internet" and infamous refrain, "tits or GTFO [get the fuck out," which functions as a demand to prove one is a woman (by providing a photo of ones breasts) or leave.

As Barlow narrates it, a second encounter—this time with an FBI Special Agent who sought Barlow out for information on hackers while investigating the theft of Apple source code—provides an opportunity for "cyberpunks" like Acid Phreak and folks like Barlow to see themselves as one in their shared disdain for the hapless Agent Baxter who doesn't understand what it means for source code to be stolen (we are told he was expecting something physical, irreplaceable, which might be returned if found).

Weaving throughout the narrative are Barlow's reflections on "the opening of Cyberspace," its "nature" and the insufficiencies of our existing means of making sense of and legally ordering this new world. These ruminations constitute an onto-imaginary that supports a vision of Cyberspace as a promising new space for the general public, rather than an exclusive realm for elites and geeks. In the following section I discuss the former imaginary before illustrating how Barlow's account attempts to absorb it into a conception that would have wider appeal.

Repurposing Gibson's Dystopian Cyberspace

The term "Cyberspace" was coined by science fiction author William Gibson in the short story *Burning Chrome*. In a later novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), a voice-over from children's documentary provides a detailed and oft-quoted description of what everybody in Gibson's fictional world already knows:

> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding.[32]

[32] William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 51.

Gibson's definition of the term "Cyberspace" as a "hallucinate[ed]" "nonspace" creates a jarring dissonance. The alliterative term Cyberspace rolls off the tongue and purports to convey some information about what the unknown word means: Cyber*space* is some sort of space. However, the sleek abstraction of Cyberspace quickly bumps up against the clunky reality that it is *not* a space, revealed and embodied by the awkward term "nonspace" which, in both form and content, seems strikingly close to "nonsense."

In this Cyberspace, one operates as a "disembodied consciousness."[33] The "elite" "cowboys" who do so cultivated "a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh."[34] The body is debased to "meat," a "prison," and—as *Neuromancer*'s antihero Case illustrates by replacing organs so he can continue a drug habit—a costly and vulnerable tool of escape.[35]

Gibson's Cyberspace is more akin to a drug-induced hallucination than an inhabitable, collective world: *Neuromancer* paints a dystopian future-scape wherein people opt out of reality, and corporations and technology are the only agents. The exultation of a mind separated from an enfeebled body is not depicted as a good or desirable thing; instead, it marks a misidentification of reality and the surrender of autonomy in the face of what is, in fact, a "mindless" pleasure or distraction, which is no less destructive for being unreal. The "console cowboy" is the opposite of that other cowboy of popular science fiction, *Star War*'s Han Solo—Case is tricked and never redeemed, he is unable to rise above his appetites, and he doesn't "get the girl."

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[33] Ibid., 5.
[34] Ibid., 6.
[35] Ibid.

Despite its dystopian bent, early CMC adopters—who were often synonymous with early CMC "builders" or hackers—found in *Neuromancer* a rich language to describe what they were doing and experiencing. For example, in explaining the purpose of a new digital cultures magazine, *Mondo2000*, its editor-in-chief and prominent WELL member R. U. Sirius (a.k.a. Ken Goffman) takes for granted that readers will be familiar with Gibson's Cyberspace. He writes:

> *Mondo 2000* is here to cover the leading edge in hyperculture… We're talking Cyber-Chautauqua: bringing cyberculture to the people! Artificial awareness modules. Visual music. Vidscan magazines. Brain-boosting technologies. William Gibson's Cyberspace Matrix—fully realized![36]

R. U. Sirius and other early adopters/builders did not so much discount the power of corporations seeking to exploit consumer and other appetites depicted in *Neuromancer*, but imagined themselves to come out on top. They would, to use R.U. Sirius's words: "High-jack technology for personal empowerment, fun and games."[37] That these words—"empowerment," "fun" and "games"—appear side-by-side marks a rejection of the valuation implied by Gibson's description of Cyberspace as a "hallucin[ated]" "nonspace." What's more, they eagerly embraced the imagined separation of mind and body as a condition of this "empowerment, fun and games."

This cyberpunk onto-imaginary cultivates a hyper-modern subject, by which I mean it invites and enables individuals with access to it to more nearly realize the modern form of human subjectivity which, to use Stephen K. White's language, "dreams ultimately of frictionless motion," or the more nearly perfect translation of individual will

[36] R. U. Sirius, , quoted in Dery, *Flame Wars,* 14.
[37] Ibid.

into reality.[38] Agency is still conceived of as mastery and the subject is still imagined as disembodied, but his defining characteristic does not seem to be reason: it is instead masculine-gendered creativity or play.

I say masculine-gendered because of the acceptance and even admiration of actions—like those of the Mr. Bungle, the "virtual rapist" to be discussed below—which manifest as a successful imposition by an individual on others and/or the resistance of an individual to be required to act in proscribed ways. In other words, there is a sort of "penetrative" quality to the play, a masterful "shaping" typically gendered masculine.[39] Reason is perhaps even demoted, recast in terms of logic and thus merely the tool by which one builds, breaks or rebuilds the world. Finally, he is atomistic in the extreme: there are no visions that attach him to others in relations of responsibility or care. The various "prosthetics"—including Habermas's intimate, domestic sphere and the voluntary associations of Alexis de Tocqueville— which function to, in a sense, humanize the otherwise atomistic modern subject are absent in the cyber-punk imaginary of Cyberspace.[40]

This onto-imaginary both reflected early-adopters' lived experiences and shaped the built form of Cyberspace itself. The prevalence of early-adopters who built, coded, and hacked Cyberspace surely lent itself to the lived experience of agency as mastery. Paired with the experience of a way of seeing, thinking, and a practice—programming—

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[38] White, *Sustaining Affirmations: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*

[39] This is not to say that women were formally excluded from this subject position, but rather that they were would be less likely to have access to it: they were less likely to be early adopter/builders, and they were more likely to have experiences that made a state of "disembodiment" less achievable (e.g., sexual overtures that called one back to one's body, or demands that one prove that one is a woman by displaying bodily "proof").

[40] It is through the intimate, domestic sphere that Habermas's bourgeois subject recognizes his common humanity. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

that those outside the elite spheres that provided access found alien, the experiences of early-adopters confirmed a sense of exceptionalism.[41] It also paved the way for, borrowing Gibson's terms, "a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh," at least for those who couldn't imagine getting out of it by logging in.[42] Finally, the "job-based" nature of work in the tech industry, which required one to move from one team and project to another, lent itself to an atomistic sense of the self.

Cyberspace as the Next, New American West

While Cyberspace was a familiar term amongst CMC early adopter-builders, summoning shared cultural objects, practices and language, it is Barlow who is credited with popularizing the term.[43] In doing so—in fact, in order to do so—Barlow dramatically refigured Cyberspace. Barlow opens "Crime and Puzzlement" by situating himself in a "saloon," having a conversation with "Howard"—almost certainly Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*—noting the appearance of "two strangers," the two crackers—Acid Phreak and Phiber Optik—mentioned above. It's several paragraphs before the reader understands "where" this saloon is: the WELL, which Barlow characterizes as "an example of the latest thing in frontier villages."[44] It takes another paragraph still, before one finds how to get there: "To enter it, one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone."[45]

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[41] For example, see: Ellen Ullman, *Close to the Machine: Technophilia and its Discontents* (NY: Picador, 2012 (1997); Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture.*
[42] Ullman, *Close to the Machine.*
[43] Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier*; Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, 171.
[44] Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement."
[45] Ibid.

Citing Gibson and describing Cyberspace as "an immense region of electron states, microwaves, magnetic fields, light pulses and thought," language that references Gibson's Cyberspace and its uptake amongst early adopters, Barlow immediately recasts it in terms of the American West, writing:

> Cyberspace, in its present condition, has a lot in common with the 19th Century West. It is vast, unmapped, culturally and legally ambiguous, verbally terse (unless you happen to be a court stenographer), hard to get around in, and up for grabs. Large institutions already claim to own the place, but most of the actual natives are solitary and independent, sometimes to the point of sociopathy. It is, of course, a perfect breeding ground for both outlaws and new ideas about liberty.[46]

In likening Cyberspace to the "19th Century West," Barlow cashes in on a rich language of metaphor and myth that, as historian Richard Slotkin illustrated, has repeatedly been used to reinvent America.[47] Speaking of the use of frontier myth by 20th century U.S. politics including U.S. Presidents, Kennedy, Johnson and Reagan, Slotkin writes that it offered "a model of successful and morally justifying action… Those who were persuaded to identify with [it] found that it entailed more than a simple affiliation… Its central purpose was to summon the nation as a whole to undertake (or at least support) a *heroic* engagement" in the "struggle" at hand, whether communism or government overreach.

There were, undoubtedly, already traces of frontier mythology in Gibson's Cyberspace: "console cowboys," a restless movement indicative of an inability to "settle"

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*; Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization*; Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*: *The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*.

down.[48] However, paired with the alien language of "electron states, microwaves, magnetic fields, light pulses and thought,"[49] Cyberspace would likely continue to appear as an exclusive realm for the elite, the strange, the fearful. Recasting these figures as characters in a Western—the "solitary," the "sociopath[s]," the "outlaws"—provides a conceptual and aesthetic framework for making sense of those who feel at home in "an immense region of electron states." Even crackers like Acid Phreak and Phiber Optik, can be saved, and their "bad behavior" explained in terms of youth and media-induced bombast: "they were like another kid named Billy, many of whose feral deeds in the pre-civilized West were encouraged by the same dime novelist who chronicled them."[50] Such framing would make Cyberspace and the host of characters seen to inhabit it in mainstream media intelligible and so less fearful; we may even admire them. It also implies a different "bad guy": the media.

At the same time, references to "frontier villages" and "town meetings" from an author whose prose pairs well with the reminder—ever-present in his writings—that he spent most of his life in "actual cow-towns" offers a vision of who and how we might "be" in Cyberspace: pioneers, prospectors, settlers.[51] While this new frontier may not be for everyone, it is for "most," even more so than the mythologized American West. As

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[48] These traces are not unique to the works of Gibson. Slotkin addresses the influence the 1950s Western had on science fiction, notably *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th Century* America, 635-636.

[49] Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement."

[50] Ibid.

[51] Though a role for "prospectors" is not central to Barlow's early (FF) missives, it is implied in language like "the opening of cyberspace." Cyberspace as an endless frontier for entrepreneurial economic expansion becomes more prominent in Barlow's writing, frequently attached to the loss of a physical frontier, including his own Wyoming ranch. For example, in a later Harper's Magazine interview, Barlow says: "the fact is, there is very little economic room in the physical world these days. If you're making something you can touch, and doing it well, then you are either an Asian or a machine" (quoted in Paul Tough, "What Are We Doing Online?" *Harper's Magazine* (August1995), 36. See especially: John Perry Barlow, "Selling Wine without Bottles," in Ludlow and Godwin, *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier*.

Barlow writes: "entering into a world in which no one has a body, physical threats begin to lose their sting."[52] Thus Cyberspace, in Barlow's framing, offers the prospect of independence, small town community, and prosperity without the risks of savage animals, Indians or environs.

Interweaving descriptions of a cyberpunk Cyberspace with accounts of his Wyoming cattle ranch and language hailing the mythic frontier, Barlow draws upon shared cultural imaginary to map ambiguous "electron states" onto the American West. In so doing he refigures Cyberspace as a space in transition—as when he writes "in its present condition"—which can and should be actively shaped.

A month after the publication of "Crime and Puzzlement," Barlow, casting himself as "an emissary between the magicians of technology and the wary populace who must incorporate this magic into their daily lives," both clarifies and expands the mission of the EFF, tasking it with "bringing civilization to Cyberspace."[53] I quote him at length below:

> … our original objectives were more modest… In essence, we were prepared to fight a few civil libertarian brush fires and go on about our private work.
>
> However, examination of the issues surrounding these government actions revealed that we were dealing with the symptoms of a much larger malady, the collision between Society and Cyberspace. We have concluded that a cure can lie only in bringing civilization to Cyberspace.
>
> Unless a successful effort is made to render that harsh and mysterious terrain suitable for ordinary inhabitants, friction between the two worlds will worsen. Constitutional protections, indeed the perceived legitimacy of representative government itself, might gradually disappear.

[52] Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement."
[53] Mitchell Kapor and John Perry Barlow, "Across the Electronic Frontier," Electronic Frontier Foundation, July 10, 1990, https://w2.eff.org/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/HTML/eff.html, (accessed March 19, 2015).

> We could not allow this to happen unchallenged, and so arises the Electronic Frontier Foundation. In addition to our legal interventions on behalf of those whose rights are threatened, we will:
>
> [-] Engage in and support efforts to educate both the general public and policymakers about the opportunities and challenges posed by developments in computing and telecommunications.
> [-] Encourage communication between the developers of technology, government, corporate officials, and the general public in which we might define the appropriate metaphors and legal concepts for life in Cyberspace.
> [-] And, finally, foster the development of new tools which will endow non-technical users with full and easy access to computer-based telecommunications.[54]

This call to "brin[g] civilization to Cyberspace" presumes it—civilization—already exists. The "action items" affirm this; the problem with Cyberspace, in Barlow's framing, isn't who is there, it's who is not and why: "the general public," which finds no "suitable" place in the "harsh and mysterious terrain" of Cyberspace. In short: civilization and a broader American public go hand in hand.

Like the cyberpunk vision of Cyberspace, Barlow forwards a vision of Cyberspace as a space of disembodied thought or mind. However, the figure of the human subject is more conventionally modern; he presumes a will to reasonably discuss matters of general concern as formally equal subjects.[55] With this view, Barlow encourages the reader to frame the aforementioned "breakdown of civility" as the result of artificial divisions—a mere developmental stage—rather than a fundamentally different view of what Cyberspace was and how one should act when there.

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[54] Kapor and John Barlow, "Across the Electronic Frontier."
[55] Barlow is hardly alone in this vision. Others, like Howard Rheingold, speak of the possibility of Cyberspace to afford salons, as in enlightenment France. Rheingold also quotes Habermas extensively in his book *The Virtual Community*. Echoing Habermas' account of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere, Rheingold is concerned with commercialization. In other words: the people are imagined to already be (or to be capable of becoming) the modern, reasoning, publically opining subject; and this is imagined to be desirable for democracy.

Fred Turner, touching on the *Harper's Magazine* forum of which Barlow also speaks, makes a related point: "the forum itself modeled the WELL's own vision of computer-mediated communication… contributors took part in a seemingly nonhierarchical, disembodied conversation among equals, and they did so in the same computer 'space' supposedly being attacked by these very hackers. It is this *form* of conversation, and the image of hackers participating in it, that *Harper's* made visible to its readers."[56] However, Turner attributes this vision to new communalism, his term for a portion of the 1960s counterculture movement who disengaged in politics as they participated in the back-to-the-land movement.

I think Turner's attribution vastly underestimates what was a broad investment in this egalitarian vision of bodiless public discourse, whose history extends far beyond the 1960s. Additionally, *Harper's* also reported the publication of Barlow's credit records by Phiber Optik, a move that fits poorly with the vision Turner attributes to the WELL. It is Barlow's account that reframes Phiber Optik's action: though spook[ed]," Barlow explains that he responded by asking Phiber Optik to "give [him] a call."[57] He reports having a conversation with "an intelligent, civilized, and surprisingly principled kid of 18 who sounded, and continues to sound, as though there's little harm in him to man or data." This paves the way for Barlow to shift the blame for their initial "incivility" to mainstream media portrayals of hackers, expressly including *Harper's* editors, and to further rehabilitate Phiber Optik's actions by reference to the seemingly timeless "adolescent sport" of "teenage boys."

[56] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 169-170.
[57] Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement."

Barlow thus recasts the cyberpunk subjectivity of Phreak and Optic as a developmental stage, perfectly amenable to the cultivation of civilly debating citizens of Cyberspace. At the same time, Barlow's onto-imaginary breaks with that of modernity by excising precisely the vulnerabilities—bodily and economic—that in modern States of Nature motivated naturally free, self-interested individuals to consent to be governed. Finally, Barlow envisions the fundamental state of human being as an unproblematic, organic community. It is fear—owing to our vulnerable physical state—that divides and turns us one against the other, and media and governments leverage fear to consolidate their power. In Cyberspace, where we are invulnerable, we can "be" without fear.

Civilizing Cyberspace

Two things are needed to "civilize" Cyberspace. The first, already underway in Barlow's recasting it in terms of the next, new American West, is making Cyberspace *recognizable* as a space for the imagined collective of "the general public." The second revolves around "access." Regarding the first, early EFF publications indicate an awareness that the "reality" of Barlow's Cyberspace depends on its uptake by the general public. Aside from his own rhetorical efforts to refigure Cyberspace, Barlow speaks repeatedly of finding metaphors that would illuminate the "nature" of Cyberspace. Simultaneously, hailing an imagined organic community by reference to a single "distributed Mind," Barlow encourages EFF supporters to

> turn some of the immense processing horsepower of your distributed Mind to the task of finding useful new metaphors for community, expression, property,

> privacy and other realities of the physical world which seem up for grabs in these less tangible regions.[58]

Similarly, Barlow encouraged digital "natives" to "share [their] sense of hope and opportunity with those who feel that in Cyberspace they will be obsolete eunuchs for sure."[59] This line is particularly interesting, both signaling and resolving the fragility of the modern (masculine) subject whose agency is conceived of in terms of mastery and is threatened by an environment it does not know how to navigate, much less subdue.

In addition to encouraging the "natives" to be helpful—a vision that occludes the violence inflicted on indigenous Americans—Barlow and the EFF advocate the design of more accessible, user-friendly software. For all that such software may be desirable, when packaged alongside the specter of "obsolete eunuchs," the expansion of such user-friendly designs extends the promise of agency as mastery in Cyberspace, for those individuals accustomed to it; it also risks "empowering" those in positions of power who could threaten EFF's vision. In these ways, Barlow and the EFF attempt to more broadly materialize that which his Cyberspace onto-imaginary takes as already existing.

In the face of increased publicity around fearful objects—hackers, crackers, computer worms, not to mention easy access to pornography— Barlow's Cyberspace attempts to subsume its earlier instantiation as a cyberpunk space of play, figuring it as a developmental stage rather than a fundamental state. Equally important, it supplies a conceptual and aesthetic framework for a broader public not only to make sense of Cyberspace, but also to imagine themselves as a part of its settlement. Taken together, Cyberspace as the frontier of human civilization represents a landless world of

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[58] John Perry Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement 2," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, July 21, 1990, https://w2.eff.org/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/crime_and_puzzlement.2.txt.
[59] Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement."

opportunity and community in which the safety afforded by leaving the physical world behind provides a standpoint from which to reconsider common sense understandings of the relationship between individuals and the state. The human subject is figured as fundamentally the same as in a modern onto-imaginary, although now situated in a world without vulnerability—a Cyber-State of Nature—where we can expect a radically different outcomes. In place of the pervasive presence of fear, Barlow imagines increasing individual empowerment and collective engagement: an organic community and a standpoint from which to question to the legitimacy of government power so premised on the insecurity of material bodies and possessions.

The drama of this (symbolic) resolution between the cyberpunk Cyberspace and Cyberspace as the next, new American West played out in multiple settings: the EFF released several different accounts narrating its founding in 1990 alone,[60] which were echoed or expanded upon in edited volumes on Cyberspace with subtitles situating the reader "on the electronic frontier."[61] Barlow himself became something of a public intellectual, gaining entry to high-level talks, including a face-to-face conversation with President George Bush, Sr. and a seat at the 1994 World Wide Web Consortium. He would also accrue a motley collection of accolades and titles, including "the Thomas Jefferson of Cyberspace," "One of the 25 Most Influential People in Financial Services," "Professor of Cyberspace."

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[60] In addition to "Crime and Puzzlement" and "Crime and Puzzlement 2," see: Kapor and Barlow, "Across the Electronic Frontier"; Barlow, "A Not Terribly Brief History of the Electronic Frontier."

[61] Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier*; Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*; Dery, *Flame Wars*; Brook and Boal, *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information*; Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* ; Leeson, *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*; Ludlow and Godwin, *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier.*

While Barlow's re-branding of Cyberspace in terms of the frontier resonated widely, the "civilization clause" was less successful and certainly was not embraced by those attached to the cyberpunk vision. Indeed, Barlow's high-sounding prose became something of a joke amongst those attached to Cyberspace as a space of play and creativity. The following section introduces one such character and gestures towards the abandonment by Barlow and others of efforts to civilize Cyberspace.

V. Forsaking Civilization in Cyberspace

Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" is pitched as an account of how a virtual rape and its aftermath "turned a database into a society."[62] It is also an account of how the author came to question his common-sense understanding of Cyberspace and the relationship among bodies, words, and strangers addressed therein; and Dibbell's essay is expressly presented as a prod for others to do the same. He begins with "the facts" of the virtual rape; I do the same below.

The virtual rape took place in LambdaMOO, a popular role-playing MUD (see Figure 1 above) and consisted of the attribution of sexual acts by one LambdaMOO user ("Mr. Bungle") to two others ("legba" and "Starsinger"). Mr. Bungle hacked a LambdaMOO sub-program that allowed him to control legba and Starsinger. He then made it appear that they were, among other things, "sexually service[ing]" him and engaging in sexual intercourse with a kitchen knife.[63] Legba, described as a woman, and Starsinger, described as "brown-skinned" and "of indeterminate gender," were still able to control their characters—e.g., they protested and relocated—but they could not

[62] Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace," tagline from p. 7.
[63] Ibid.

prevent Mr. Bungle from also relocating and continuing the virtual assault. The virtual rape stopped when a "wizard"—that is, a LambdaMOO programmer—came upon the scene and was able to kick Mr. Bungle out of the LambdaMOO system.

Dibbell did not witness the rape himself; instead he came upon an intense discussion of what to do about it. He reports that LambdaMOO users were clearly shaken and wanted to take action to prevent future instances of virtual rape. While there was a clear consensus that something should be done, debate raged—and sometimes slogged—over what that something would be. Eventually, another wizard acted alone, "toading" Mr. Bungle, meaning that his character was permanently deleted.

In response to these occurrences, LambdaMOO's Archwizard, or master programmer, unilaterally implemented a "system of petitions and ballots whereby anyone could put to popular vote any social scheme requiring wizardly powers for its implementation, with the results of the vote to be binding on the wizard."[64] The result was a series of tools and institutionalized practices for responding to virtual rape and other forms of sexualized harassment especially common for those identifying as women.[65]

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[64] Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace."

[65] Balka, "Women's Access to On-line Discussions about Feminism"; Balka, "Women Talk Goes Online: The Use of Computer Networks in the Context of Feminist Social Change" (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 1991); Camp, "We Are Geeks, and We Are Not Guys: The Systers Mailing List," in Cherny and Weise, *Wired_Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*; Maureen Majella Ebben, "Women on the Net: An exploratory study of gender dynamics on the soc. women computer network" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1994); Susan Herring, "Gender and Democracy in Computer-Mediated Communication," *Electronic Journal of Communication* 3, no. 2 (1993): http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/v3n293.htm; Susan Herring, "Gender Difference in Computer-Mediated Communication: Bringing Familiar Baggage to the New Frontier" (keynote talk, "Making the Net*Work*: Is There a Z39.50 in Gender Communication?" panel, American Library Association annual convention, Miami, FL, June 27, 1994); Susan Herring, "Posting in a Different Voice: Gender and Ethics in Computer-Mediated Communication," in Ess, *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication*, 115-45; Susan Herring, "The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment On-line," *The Information Society* 15, no. 3 (1999), 151-167; Susan Herring et al., "Searching for Safety Online: Managing 'Trolling' in a

Dibbell closes the article by reflecting on a conception of free speech premised on, to use his words, a "tidy division of the world into the symbolic and the real."[66] He had, it seemed, been an adherent of a Barlow-esque, that is, a modern onto-imaginary of Cyberspace and the mode of human subjectivity it supported. It was not only the virtual rape and its aftermath that served as a prod for Dibbell to reconsider, but rather his time moving in the space of LambdaMOO.

Reception of "A Rape in Cyberspace" on the WELL

Roughly a week after its publication, Dibbell's piece became the subject of a WELL conference, in which both Dibbell and Barlow would participate. For the most part, Dibbell's account was met with a hard line of resistance from WELL members. Those who understood Cyberspace as a space for individual expression and play framed the virtual rape as an instance of play which participants consented to—regardless of what happens—by "being" there. For example, *Mondo 2000* editor R. U. Sirius responded:

> these people all volunteered to act in a theater of the imagination and then got scared. Do we want Disney World? As the simulacrum becomes a bigger part of our lives, do we demand that people clip their imaginations at the place where it feels comfortable... community standards? We're entering the "Be careful what

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Feminist Forum." *The Information Society* 18, No. 5 (2002), 371-384; Susan Herring et al., "'This Discussion Is Going Too Far!' Male Resistance to Female Participation on the Internet," in Bucholtz and Hall, *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, 67-96; Cheris Kramarae and H. Jeanie Taylor, "Women and Men on Electronic Networks: A Conversation or a Monologue?" in Taylor et al., *Women, Information Technology, and Scholarship*, 52-61; Judy Smith and Ellen Balka, "Chatting on a Feminist Network," in Kramarae, *Technology and Women's Voices*, 82-97; Dale Spender, *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*; Dale Spender, "The Position of Women in Information Technology; or Who Got There First and with What Consequences?" *Current Sociology* 45, no. 2 (1997), 135-147; Laurel Sutton, "Using Usenet: Gender, Power, and Silence in Electronic Discourse" (proceedings of the 20th annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, Berkeley, CA, 1994); Margie Wylie, "No Place for Women: Internet Is Flawed Model for the Infobahn," *Digital Media* 4, no. 8 (1995), 3-6.

[66] Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace,"

> you say" era, where everything is mediated by politesse… I think that freedom would be well-served by simple toughening up.[67]

Here, R. U. Sirius grants that Legba and Starsinger were impacted—they felt "scared" and "hurt" (a term he uses later)—but suggests that they consented to these and any other possibility by going online. Their feelings may be real, but they don't and shouldn't matter how on-line action and interaction is understood or how it might be governed.

Most granted that the virtual rape was offensive, but drew a sharp line between the disembodied self of Cyberspace and an embodied, "real world" self. With this line drawn, legba, Starsinger and Dibbell become objects of scorn, "hysterics": they are unable to "distance" themselves from what is ontologically envisioned as at a distance: minds and bodies.[68] But the problem seems to extend well beyond this moment, as critics suggest this instance represents a larger threat to society in its further muddying the "already overextended" "legal definition" of "forcible rape." [69]

Dibbell, party to the conversation, and particularly concerned by this last accusation, explains that he decided to use the language of "virtual rape" because those who had similar experiences chose that language, noting that "much of the negative response [came] from guys who [he] suspect[ed] just don't take sexual harassment seriously."[70] In reply, Dibbell is accused of being sexist to men.[71]

The specter of "culture wars," the women's movement, and identity politics

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[67] RUSirius (rusirius), January 3, 1994 (01:29 PM), comment 33 of 124 on jonl (jonl), "mondo.old 298: Rape in Cyberspace," *The WELL*, [date of post], https-//user.well.com/engaged.cgi?c=mondo.old&t=298&f=0&q=0-. [NOTE: this link didn't work for me]
[68] Tom Mandel (mandel), January 5, 1994 (10:13 AM), comment 54 of 124 on jonl (jonl), "mondo.old 298: Rape in Cyberspace."
[69] tkukl, January 2, 1994 (05:40 PM), comment 11 of 124 on jonl, "mondo.old 298: Rape in Cyberspace."
[70] Julian Dibbell (julian), January 2, 1994 (07:13 PM), comment 12 of 124 on jonl (jonl), "mondo.old 298: Rape in Cyberspace,"
[71] Tom Mandel (mandel), January 2, 1994 (08:08 PM), comment 15 of 124 jonl (jonl), "mondo.old 298: Rape in Cyberspace."

hangs over the discussion like a thick cloud threatening the reality of onto-imaginaries that posited these social and political investments as somewhere on the spectrum between meaningless and impossible in Cyberspace. At one point R. U. Sirius writes: "This all seems to be part of the 'women's movement' to degrade themselves by being too emotionally reactive to support basic freedoms..."[72] Months later, in a revised and expanded version of "A Rape in Cyberspace," Dibbell reflects on the responses he received, the most enduring and heated of which hailed from the BBSs [bulletin board services] of Cyberspace, writing: "The more I ponder the furious online response to my story, the more I suspect the real object of that fury was not LambdaMOO nor America's latest culture wars, but the ambiguous nature of online discourse itself."[73]

One might be tempted to draw a sharp distinction between MUDs, like LambdaMOO, and forums, like the WELL, which might look something like this: MUDs—like The Sims, Second Life, or World of Warcraft—are for play, while forums are for discussion which, if not always serious, at least can be said not to be games. But the individuals involved did not draw this distinction; indeed, commenters on the WELL repeatedly resisted one member's suggestion that what LamdbaMOO did in their own space was of no concern. Dibbell's article, increasingly common mainstream reports of sexual harassment online, and agitation for regulating pornography online and elsewhere, prompted an abandonment of the vision of Cyberspace as a frontier of human civilization.[74] Later the same year, in a keynote essay in *Computer World*, Barlow is now

[72] RUSirius (rusirius), January 3, 1994 (01:29 PM), comment 33 of 124 on jonl (jonl), "mondo.old 298: Rape in Cyberspace."
[73] Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace," in Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, 261.
[74] Tannen, "Gender gap in cyberspace," *Newsweek*, *May* 16 (1994): 54.

associating civilization with presumptively male, but perhaps questionably masculine "[s]ettlers":

> Settlers, a milder sort, come in with their women and children and are repelled by the savagery and license of their predecessors, whether mountain men, prospectors, or Indians. They send for troops to secure the frontier for the Rotary Club and the PTA. They elect representatives, pass laws, and, pretty soon, they've created another place which is boring but which at least appears predictable.[75]

He advises "young pioneers" not to "come to this wild place expecting to civilize it, as I once did. This frontier may well be permanent[.] And, finding bedlam, please don't send for your troops. They will only get in the way of a future which you will have to invent yourselves."[76]

Certainly Barlow is not wrong to see the historical links between state regulation and women and children, figured as "exceptionally" vulnerable figures.[77] But then Dibbell's account was not figured as addressing such figures: it addressed the public at large. This distinction is significant: it was fear of an over-reaching state, not practices of public speech that assumed embodied speakers, that prompted the abandonment of a civilized Cyberspace. The ideal of a liberal, bourgeois public remains intact even as its realization is deferred to an illusive future in which cyberpunks "grow up" and accept the value and terms of civil debate, and hysterics, like Dibbell, no longer confronted with the "offensive" antics of the former, can do the same. This deferral would serve as an

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[75] John Perry Barlow, "Jack In, Young Pioneer!" Electronic Frontier Foundation, August 11, 1994, https://w2.eff.org/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/HTML/jack_in_young_pioneer.html, (accessed: 23 March 2015).
[76] Ibid.
[77] Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule*; Laura Miller, "Women and children first: Gender and the settling of the electronic frontier" in Brook and Boal, *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information.*

obstacle to imagining and building CMC conducive to alternative practices of publicity no longer tethered to Habermas's ideal.

VI. Conclusion

Critical accounts of Cyberspace suggested that it functioned as a discourse that served the interests of the privileged. Notably, feminist scholars have criticized the ontologically absurd concept of "mind" and "body" as discrete entities, while simultaneously illustrating how this conceptualization supports familiar gendered dichotomies: mind/body, masculine/feminine, transcendent/immanent.[78] Cyberspace, figured as the disembodied space of thought or mind, enabled the (continued) gendering of the body as feminine and its (continued) devaluation in a new arena. More recently, communications scholar Fred Turner has argued that Cyberspace, depicted as a frontier, functioned pragmatically to narrate and ameliorate the more widespread material insecurity characteristic of the developing global information economy. Bold cowboy-types served as a contemporary manifestation of the "truth" that it is the individual who directs the course of his life.

While these accounts are not incorrect, they are, I think, partial. And they have had some of adverse effects. For one, they tend to paint a problematically uniform vision of Cyberspace, which overlooks the important ways in which the term was refigured and contested. While both were premised on CMC as a disembodied space of mind, the cyberpunk vision of Cyberspace and Barlow's Electronic Frontier are at odds in ways

[78] Grosz, *Architecture from the outside: Essays on virtual and real space*; Halyes, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cyberpunks, Literature and Informatics*; Sobchack, "New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers" in Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.*

that matter in terms of who would see themselves as potentially "at home" in these spaces. Aside from flattening out the "landscape" of the early CMC, these explanations suggest that the political work of these early spatial imaginaries was limited to a discourse that upheld existing offline inequality. But such a partial account misses how these contested imaginaries shaped practices of publicity and figures of the democratic subject they both hailed and cultivated.

In particular, it was by means of these ontologized accounts of Cyberspace that CMC was conceptualized as a new public space, and its practices of publicity consolidated a modern conception of the democratic subject. This happened at a time when the modern subject was under increasing duress. Certainly, by 1990, the notion of an autonomous, atomistic, and critical-rational subjectivity had been criticized in a wide range of scholarship. Feminist and post-colonial theory, in particular, had critically interrogated how maintaining, even as fantasy, the existence of such a subject required the subordination of a range of others.

But the duress I speak of is also very much a thing of the non-academic world: in short, formal equality for (some) former second-class citizens has not shut them up. In various ways, the ongoing agitations of the women's movement and identity politics, manifesting as "race riots" and "culture wars," all impinge on the coherence of claims to universal access to the status of modern subjectivity, and so also on the coherence of an ontology undergirding that subjectivity. In this context, Cyberspace—newly refigured as the "frontier of human civilization" becomes a site for the subject's imperiled realization as an unmarked member of humanity.

Barlow's civilizing mission was deeply problematic; but in abandoning it he did not—nor have many others—give up the ideal of public discourse akin to Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. In many ways, it is built into the design and "normal" practices and visions of publicity in online forums, which reflect and cultivate an onto-imaginary wherein the modern subject's sincere intention to communicate and his use of reason are already adequate to the task of democratic public discourse… if only everyone would rise to the occasion.

Barring that, we must, regretfully, throw our hands in the air and retreat to mainstream media—print and digital—to bemoan the present state of affairs and so consolidate, once again, Habermas's public as an unquestioned ideal and the exclusive means by which public discourse can be imagined as democratic. Others hold out hope for the realization of this ideal by means of thick-skinned subjects, subjects who cannot be harmed by the words of others, and who cannot be imposed upon, or penetrated by things external to the self. In a sense this vision represents a move closer to the hyper-modern subject of cyberpunks whom we might call, in our present moment, Internet trolls.

This hyper-modern subject is achieved through mastery of the self, but also of the medium. Indeed, technical "fixes" rather than collective, socio-political approaches to the challenges raised by Dibbell's account have become the norm. By way of example, online public forums increasingly ban anonymous posting. The hope—despite a lack of evidence—is that being more easily identifiable online will prevent individuals from posting bigoted, harassing comments or rape and death threats. While one could get around this requirement by, for example, not using one's real name on linked email or

Facebook account, this approach might yet normalize data collection practices that have been criticized as indicative of state overreach.

Individuals like Barlow and Howard Rheingold, speaking from mainstream platforms of the democratic potential of CMC, hoped it might offer something akin to Habermas's liberal public and so a means by which "the people" could once more overthrow tyranny—this time of mass media and an overreaching state, rather than an absolute sovereign—and represent themselves. At the same time they neglected tensions between this vision of public discourse and that of John Stuart Mill's "marketplace of ideas," in part because the demise of the liberal bourgeois public was attributed to mass media.[79]

On Habermas's account, by the time of Mill's treatise on freedom of expression, bourgeois norms of "conviviality" and civil, public discourse had eroded (along with bourgeois men's exclusive hold on the rights of citizenship) and public opinion was no longer conceived of as the outcome of reasoned debate. Instead, it was viewed as another form of power acting on the individual, potentially discouraging him from the Enlightenment ideal of thinking for himself. Free public discourse could serve as a

[79] At this point I am interested in teasing out how and why similar understandings of the liberal speaking subject of democratic discourse lead to different visions of liberal publicness in the context of CMC. Others have troubled the historical validity of Habermas's account of a civil, ratio-critical debating public existing even for a short time (Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders*). In a different vein and with a different historical-geographic focus, Dena Goodman suggests Habermas fails to account for the development and nearest realization of his bourgeois ideal in French salons *governed* by *salonnières* who cultivated spaces and discursive practices shaped by friendship and reciprocity. Goodman argues the moderating force of the *salonnières* was seen as appropriate and necessary owing to contemporary understandings of gendered complementarity, suggesting embodied particularity played a central role in the development of the practices of the culture-debating public that Habermas takes as the incubator of his liberal bourgeois public. Finally, as women were barred from participation in public discourse, Goodman indicates discursive style changed, becoming uncivil, and competitive. See: Goodman, *Republic of Letters*.

constraint on the state, but public opinion was thought to represent not "the people" but the majority who had tyrannical tendencies.

These different visions of liberal publicness would play out in CMC as tensions between "community" and individual autonomy, understood as a right to "say anything" effectively anywhere online.[80] Owing to its eventual association with cyber-libertarianism, I refer to the visions and practices of publicness cultivated by those who emphasized individual autonomy in this way as a *libertarian* practice of publicity or libertarian publicness. As elaborated in my first and second chapters, both liberal and libertarian publicness would develop alongside and through interpretation of the "nature" of CMC and, more or less implicitly, of human users. While both share an essentially liberal view of the speaking subject of democratic discourse as disembodied or abstracted from his particular embodied and material conditions, they differ on the prospects and desirability of some form of (imagined) virtual community or collective that could act on the individual (for good or ill).

Libertarian publicness would become empirically dominant online, owing in part to the design of early CMC, its expansive growth, and developments to accommodate growth that centered individual readers' discretion.[81] As such, it would powerfully shape common-sense understanding of CMC platforms. So, for example, the delineation of "public" CMC platforms, like Usenet newsgroups, and "private" platforms, like mailing

[80] As Usenet scholar Bryan Pfaffenberger explains: "The sense of bottom-up democracy was built into the software... [because], from a technical point of view Usenet encourages everybody to say anything, and it's up to the reader to screen out unwanted material." See: Bryan Pfaffenberger, "'A Standing Wave in the Web of Our Communications': Usenet and the Socio-Technical Construction of Cyberspace Values," in Lueg and Fisher, *From Usenet to CoWebs: Interacting with Social Information Space*, 24.
[81] Pfaffenberger, "'A Standing Wave in the Web of Our Communications': Usenet and the Socio-Technical Construction of Cyberspace Values," 24.

lists, would come to hinge on whether or not there were formal barriers to "say[ing] anything."[82]

At the same time, liberal publicness—that is, affecting bourgeois norms of civil discourse—would continue to function both as a mark of distinction and an appeal to recuperate the lost promise of a truly universal, liberal democratic public sphere. Thus, even as political theorists, feminists and otherwise, were critiquing the validity of Habermas's historical account and creating spaces in the Academy from which to theorize the operations of the liberal public sphere as a disciplinary ideal, that ideal was installed at the heart of CMC. As such, the ideal functioned to distinguish not only "inappropriate" public speech, diminishing the epistemic authority of alternative practices of public speech, but also "inappropriate" or unlikely places for such speech. In the face of ongoing obstructions from "adolescent boys" and the "hysterics" who took them too seriously, Cyberspace would become one such place. What followed was a diminished sense of Cyberspace as a real public space in which we might reorganize our relations to democratic strangers.

Durable Enlightenment narratives and a closer association with print media underwrite the normative dominance of liberal publicness which reproves both the excesses of a libertarian practice, in eschewing constraints on the individual in the context of CMC, and a feminist counter-public practice that is seen to make excessive demands on individual contributors. The dynamic relationship between these two visions of liberal publicness and that of the feminist counter-publics I study is central to my

[82] As will be seen in Chapter Two, there was tremendous pressure for feminist CMC to "go" or remain private and intense resistance to even the quasi-public of a moderated newsgroup.

dissertation and can be somewhat bluntly parsed as a dynamic between trolls, hysterics, and "reasonable men."

This chapter is not intended only as a straightening of accounts. And I am hardly the first to speak to the ways in which the discourses of Cyberspace as a disembodied world served the interests of the privileged.[83] By focusing on onto-imaginaries that cultivate different understandings of the self and her relation to others, however, I want to shift the focus from the fact of inequality to consider how practices of publicity cultivate different understandings of the self and differently orient us towards strangers in ways that matter for addressing or sidestepping structural inequality. Conceived as both ideal and impossible online, Habermas's liberal public diffuses tensions stemming from peoples' lived experience of the body following them into Cyberspace, by minimizing the perceived value and effects of unruly, uncivil online discourse. Thus, finally, it serves also as an obstruction to other visions and practices of public speech and democratic speakers that take their bearings from "actually existing democracy," to use Nancy Fraser's terms, including its durable structural inequalities. I turn in Chapter Two to a close study of the halting, ten-year development of a feminist practice of publicity in early CMC to illustrate this point.

[83] Dean, *Blog Theory*; Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cyberpunks, Literature and Informatics*; Lisa Nakamura, "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," in Bell and Kennedy, *The Cybercultures Reader*; Sobchack, "New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading *Mondo 2000*."

CHAPTER TWO

'UNCONVENTIONAL' WOMEN AND THE PARADOXES OF EARLY FEMINIST COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

> …lest you think that this is a tempest in a teapot, it's not. But the issue is not whether Lippmann was libeled but rather whether being an unconventional woman is net.death.
> - Valerie Maslak[1]

I. Introduction

Writing in 1993, a matter of months before the moderated Usenet soc.feminism would change its charter to ban anti-feminist posts, contributor Pei Hsie wrote:

> In principle... these newsgroups are free and open to anyone who wishes to participate, or not participate, for that matter -- but in reality, for women, there is no choice, or rather, it has already been made for them. If women do not participate they run the risk of being accused of perpetuating stereotypes and reprimanded with 'It's your own fault, so don't complain'; and if they do participate, they leave themselves open to the abuses of the tirades and rantings of the men who dominate these women's issues groups... at this point I think the question is: can the views of women supporting their own sex be given fair representation here at all?[2]*

The dilemma Hsie raises and the question she asks mirror those of many feminists in the "free and open" newsgroups of Usenet and on other early computer-mediated

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[1] Valerie Maslak, October 19, 1987, response to Dave Collier-Brown, "Mark Ethan Smith: For real?" posted to news.admin and misc.legal Usenet newsgroups, October 1, 1987, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/misc.legal/Ej48uajYE3Q/discussion.

[2] Pei Hsieh, April 23, 1993, response to Pei Hsieh, "Has anything changed?", posted to soc.women, soc.men, & alt.feminism Usenet newsgroups, April 14, 1993, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.women/OKKdQZLm5Y4/discussion.

***Reading note**: Because writing conventions of online discourse do not neatly map onto conventions of academic prose, I do not use "[sic]" to indicate that grammatical or typographical errors, which are often intentional, are the authors' rather than mine.

communication (CMC) platforms. Indeed, as will be seen in Chapter Three, they remain relevant today.

In seeking an answer to Hsie's question apropos the possibility of women's fair representation—and, more precisely, a "yes"—feminists pursued a range of solutions over roughly a decade on Usenet, a non-centralized CMC network credited with shaping how social media is conceived and designed. These solutions would shape different visions and practices of the feminist subject: some would seem to confirm women's essential difference from men, others seemed to confirm the alignment of men with publicness. It would take collective action, new software, and the development of new conventions before feminists were able to "go public" in a way that did not affirm a conventional gendered dichotomy.

This chapter traces the development of feminist practices of counter-publicity. Where my first chapter focused on how imagining and naturalizing the "space" of CMC hailed and cultivated different subjects with different expectations and practices, this chapter focuses on the (im)material, built public spaces of CMC and their role in supporting, obstructing, and otherwise influencing visions and practices of public speech. The key takeaway is this: When it comes to political imaginary and worldly political practice, thinking outside the box may well require at least initial adjustments to the box.

The chapter proceeds as follows: I open with a discussion of contemporary feminist theorizing on the challenges of feminist public speech, as well as the means of responding to those challenges. In Section III I introduce the Usenet platform that is central to this chapter. Section IV discusses early efforts to create a space for women's and feminist speech on Usenet, all of which were dogged by complaint: of men's

dominance, of women's divisiveness, and so on, before taking up, in section V, the disruptive minor rhetoric of an individual feminist provocateur. Section VI sketches the development of a moderated newsgroup that would not only be for discussion of feminism, but also for discussion by feminists. I conclude by reflecting on how attending to the particular, material and semiotic dimensions of spaces of public appearances might matter for those concerned with the state of contemporary feminism.

II. Containing Feminist Speech

Melissa Deem writes that "[t]he creation of a specifically feminist public space is important, yet it also necessary to recognize that feminist discourses frequently fail to engage the political imaginary of what might be termed the public sphere writ large."[3] As a result feminism remains a minor discourse in most contexts, perceived as representing niche or even "special" interests by a broader public. Deem continues: "This failure is not merely the result of a lack of effort on the part of feminists," but owes to the frequent "relegat[ion]" of feminist public speech "to the genre of complaint."[4]

Here, "relegation" is not exclusively attributable to audience reception in a constitutively masculine-gendered public sphere, whose conventions distinguish and privilege men's speech and keep "men's speech" attached to male bodies.[5] As Lauren Berlant explains, women themselves adopt styles and tropes of the female complaint genre when they articulate gendered inequality while remaining attached to an essential

[3] Deem, "From Bobbitt to SCUM: Re-memberment, Scatological Rhetorics, and Feminist Strategies in the Contemporary United States," 512.
[4] Deem, "From Bobbitt to SCUM," 512.
[5] Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*; for literature on gender and the public sphere see my Introduction.

"female-ness," typically characterized by heterosexual desire, mothering, and nurturance.[6] The effect is to affirm the "genericizing patriarchal fantasy" that female sex makes a woman and that all women are the same in some essential way.[7]

Berlant is not arguing that conventionally feminine desires, attributes, and labor are or should be considered of lesser value, but rather that, in taking these things as essentially feminine, women affirm the gendered dichotomy that underwrites their subordination.[8] "Complaint," then, marks the ineffectual, "juxta-political" speech of women whose critiques of gendered inequality remain attached to its "product."[9] Relatedly, in expecting women to share or value particular "womanly" things, the genre of female complaint anticipates recognition and uncomplicated acceptance from other women, making it ill-suited to deal with conflict characteristic of politics.

Rather than abandon "women" as a politicized identity for reasons stemming from the analysis Berlant develops, Deem writes that feminist speech must "become risky, even dangerous. The complaint must be transformed in order to open the possibilities for speaking positions for women, other than… silence or frenzy."[10] Deem offers the "enraged polemical form" of Valerie Solanas's SCUM ("Society for Cutting Up Men") Manifesto as an example of a specifically feminist minor rhetoric that, in figuring the male body as hyper-visible, embodied, and vulnerable, "become[s] risky, even dangerous." Similarly, Berlant argues:

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[6]Berlant, "The Female Complaint."
[7] Ibid., 237-9.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 10. Indeed, Berlant attributes a commodified form of U.S. "women's culture" to the cementing this attachment, inasmuch as that culture offers women the pleasure and solace of recognition afforded by "luminous" representations of a uniquely "feminine" love that remains optimistic and loyal in the face of suffering and the deferment of improved worldly conditions.
[10] Deem, "From Bobbitt to SCUM," 532. See also: Deem, "Scandal, Heteronormative Culture, and the Disciplining of Feminism."

> We [feminists] should see feminism as a metamovement that names the emergence of shameless, self-privileging and not self-erased public female voices. It is, and should be, a collection of local and specific guerilla actions addressed to particular problems and dedicated to making the public sphere safe for women… Feminists must embrace a policy of female disidentification at the level of female essence… We must align ourselves, in our differences from each other, to perform, theorize, constantly intensify the rupture of the private, and inhabit, as much as we can, the constantly expanding negative terrain that will transform the patriarchal public sphere.[11]

Both Berlant and Deem advocate feminist speech practices that disarticulate femininity from female sex through the appropriation of conventionally masculine—aggressive, indecorous, insurgent, unrelenting—modes of address that run roughshod over bourgeois norms of unemotional, civil discourse. In this way the public sphere is made to feel newly "dangerous" to men unaccustomed to the visibility of male bodies and newly safe for women.

Of course, how this is to be done is a complicated matter. It's not a simple failure of the imagination that has prevented feminists from making political claims that evade gendered systems of oppression that disadvantage them in the first place. As Joan Scott's study of French feminist praxis in *Only Paradoxes to Offer* illustrates, feminists have had to work within and against contemporary discursive contexts: "within" in order to appear or be heard at all, and "against" in an effort to alter those contexts. The resulting "paradoxes"—here, feminists affirming an essential group identity that is simultaneously grounds for their subordination—is symptomatic of democratic and republican discourses themselves.[12]

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[11] Berlant, "The Female Complaint," 253.
[12] Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*.

Related, Michael Warner, elaborating constraints on, in this case, queer counter-public speech, explains how:

> speech that addresses a participant as queer will circulate up to a point, at which it is certain to meet intense resistance. It might therefore circulate in special, protected venues, in limited publications. The individual struggle with stigma is transposed, as it were, to the conflict between modes of publicness.[13]

This "resistance" includes violence and intimidation. It may also, as Warner suggests, include "limited" or otherwise restricted publication. Lesbian pulp novelist Vin Packer offers an example of the latter, explaining that she only secured her first contract after agreeing to not "make homosexuality attractive," to refuse a happy ending by revealing her heroine was a confused straight woman and her lover "sick or crazy."[14]

We could certainly go on here. Even still, CMC would seem to ameliorate if not entirely resolve many of these issues. What challenges and possibilities or "dangerous" speech did Usenet afford?

III. Usenet, a Brief Introduction

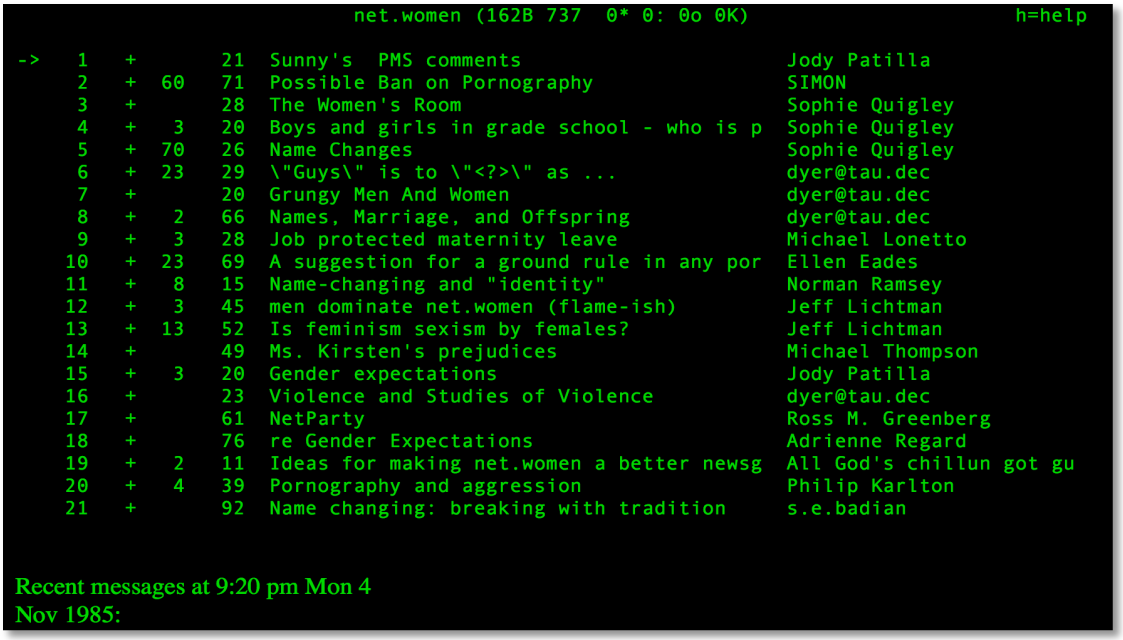
Usenet was created in 1980 as a "news service" for the simultaneously created network of Unix-users.[15] In one sense, Usenet was the software—Netnews—that this new Unix-to-Unix network ran. Netnews allowed a "home" computer to automatically dial connected computers and search for and copy new content, thereby making it available on the home machine and any computers that might likewise dial the home

[13] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 120.
[14] Vin Packer quoting publisher "Dick," in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness,* 88.
[15] Tom Truscott, "Invitation to a General Access UNIX* Network," http://www.newsdemon.com/first-official-announcement-usenet.php. Copies of original viewable as images.

computer.[16] This automated distribution function, termed propagation, enabled Usenet sites to share data—conversations, code, files—through topical newsgroups, often described as a precursor to Internet forums.

Because the Unix operating system was relatively inexpensive, Usenet was envisioned as a "poor man's ARPANET" that would expand access to networked computer-mediated communication beyond the U.S. Department of Defense and those whom it funded.[17] The latter certainly came to be true, but Usenet could hardly be said to be "for" the poor man, much less the poor woman. In point of fact, it was primarily U.S. American telecommunications and tech industry employees and university faculty, staff, and students, a majority of whom where men, who would use Usenet for the better part of the 1980s.

FIGURE 2: Screenshot from Olduse.net, a real time exhibit showing what Usenet looked like 30 years prior.[18]



[16] Hauben and Hauben, *Netizens*, 39-40.
[17] Stephen Daniel and Adam Grossman, both cited in Hauben and Hauben, *Netizens*, 42. ARPANET is the predecessor to today's Internet. ARPA is an acronym for Advanced Research Projects Agency; ARPANET refers to the network of computers connected those involved in ARPA.
[18] *Olduse.net: A Real-Time Historical Exhibit*, http://olduse.net (screenshot from November 4, 2015).

In the late 1980s Usenet became available to a wider audience by means of commercial Internet providers and computer bulletin board services, such as CompuServe and the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, respectively. Usenet's expanded audience would still be limited to those with the means of purchasing a personal computer and paying for per-minute dial-up service, or the good fortune of having public access via a library. Nonetheless, Usenet was unique in providing formally open-access, non-commercial CMC that was not closely linked to any one locale.[19]

To read and post an "article" to Usenet, one needed a program called a newsreader that served as an interface with the data the Netnews software distributed. While there were some variation in the affordances of different newsreaders—that is, what one could do owing to the newsreader software—all enabled rapid transmission and receipt of articles to one or more newsgroup, as well as reader-centered tools that offered means of filtering what one read. Reading an article or posting in a Usenet newsgroup would be similar to reading emailed contributions to a publicly posted mailing list rather than those sent to one's private email in-box.

Usenet would come to mean a lot of different things to different people, and even some of those who were instrumental in creating it had a hard time defining it. Nonetheless, one central account is the "wresting" of power from relatively elite actors—sometimes called "net.gods" and later, as they were on the decline, "the

[19] Usenet was not available globally or even in most places. The contrast is with BBSs, which were formally open to all but drew largely local participants because they required that one dial a local phone number to connect. As nationwide calling plans were rarely available, non-local users would have to make a more costly long-distance dial-up.

backbone cabal"—by "the many," a feat attributable at least as much to "technical measures" that changed the ways news was distributed as to "verbal argument."[20]

Both sides would propose, develop, and deploy technical means of enhancing individual autonomy—the ability to shape Usenet into what one wanted—though the individual in question was not the same. The net.gods generally privileged "the guy who pays the bills." For example, Mark Horton, defending a 1981 proposal to distinguish "general interest" from "personal" newsgroups, which would make it easier for a systems administrator to exclude the latter, wrote:

> We are making no attempt to mandate what people can say on USENET, e.g. censorship. What we are doing is supporting the rights of the guy who pays the bills to decide 'I only want 'business stuff' on my machine' or 'I don't want offensive stuff since I'm worried about AA/EEO suits.'[21]

As this might suggest, the gods generally favored something akin to the liberal ideal of civil discourse, if only in reaction to the possibility of lawsuits.

Meanwhile, "the masses"—often imagined as students, although many others were included—advocated unregulated speech, foregrounding the reader's ability to use software to shape Usenet in ways that met his needs and reflected his interests. Individuals could unsubscribe to unwanted newsgroups; they could hit the j-key to trash an article; and many could set up a "kill file" to automatically search headers and dispose

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[20] Bryan Pfaffenberger, "'A Standing Wave in the Web of Our Communications': Usenet and the Socio-Technical Construction of Cyberspace Values," Lueg and Fisher, *From Usenet to CoWebs: Interacting with Social Information Space*.
40. The status of these elite actors was derived from their being situated at "backbone sites," which were central (because "upstream") nodes in the network that comprised Usenet. A site became a backbone site by taking on a voluntary leadership role in developing the network. Because of their centrality, backbone sites could run up substantial bills, which elite actors indicated could result in the backbone sites being shut down.
[21]Mark Horton, "comments on comments on proposed USENET policy," posted to net.news Usenet newsgroup, December 25, 1981, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.news/3WtqnvOxPK4/discussion.

of articles that included specified words or email addresses.[22] The assertion that "That's why we have…" mailing lists, KILL files, n keys, j keys—which allowed readers to tailor their subscriptions and reading practices and avoid particular topics or authors—was central to the vision of libertarian publicness.

My research draws me to discussions of Usenet as a public forum whose expansion and development was informed by software and patches, and likewise, as an imagined space. These discussions were especially fraught in newsgroups, like net.women, which were intended to center women's concerns and create space for a public feminist discussion. Both women and men, supporters and opponents, would hold up net.women and its successor, soc.women, as exemplifying potential problems that the CMC platform Usenet afforded. These problems included an abundance of off-topic, inaccurate, or repetitive content, including meta-discussion of what was discussed and how ("low signal-to-noise ratio"); vitriolic, inflammatory articles or replies that served showmanship more than communication ("flames"); irresponsible and even intentionally disruptive contributors ("trolls"); oversensitive users who, it was feared, could create problems by going to management or suing; and a tendency to split off into increasingly specialized, non-general discussion groups ("nichification").

IV. Complaint and Containment in Early Feminist CMC

In August 1983, eight months after its creation, contributors to the Usenet newsgroup net.women were embroiled in another "meta" discussion of the early online

[22] Adam Gaffin, "Killfiles -- The cure for all that ails you," Version 2.3, The Electronic Frontier Foundation, September 1994, https://w2.eff.org/Net_culture/Net_info/EFF_Net_Guide/EEGTTI_HTML/eeg_79.html#SEC80.

forum itself. At issue were the purpose and "misuse" of the newsgroup. While the newsgroup had been created as a forum to both "support women" and brainstorm solutions to varied manifestations of gendered discrimination, discussion gravitated instead toward the validity of feminism and the meaning, desirability, and appropriateness of equality between men and women.[23] Equally disappointing to many was the far from "supportive" tone of discussion and the ratio of contributions from men and women.[24] Frustrated with the constraints of the discussion, two new newsgroups were proposed: net.women.only, in which men were asked to refrain from posting, and net.feminists, in which feminists would discuss matters of common concern, regardless of gender.[25]

Despite a brief but heated debate that never achieved consensus,[26] net.women.only was created, but another six years would pass between the proposal for a Usenet newsgroup for the discussion of feminism and its creation.[27] Another four

[23] M. T. Sarantakos, "net.women," posted to net.news.group UseNet newsgroup, January 6, 1983, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.news.group/-ra5rQG6VoY/discussion; Mary T. Sarantakos, contribution to topic thread beginning with "net.women," posted to net.news.group UseNet newsgroup, January 8, 1983, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.news.group/-ra5rQG6VoY/discussion.
[24] As elaborated in Chapter 1, anonymity and even pseudonymity were not the norm in the early years of Usenet and CMC, in general. Many used signatures that included not only a real name but also a contact phone number, the name of the organization or institution with which they were affiliated, and even a home address. Self-identifying was also common in this newsgroup ("As a man…").
[25] Liz Allen, "net.women.only," posted to net.women and net.news.groups Usenet newsgroups, August 19, 1983 https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/lw9bfkm0424/discussion; Christine Guzy, "net.feminsts," posted to net.women Usenet newsgroup, August 25, 1983, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/JTPkuuEOvqE/discussion.
[26] Lack of consensus nonetheless resulting in the creation of net.women.only was not particularly strange at this moment as there were no formal procedures, only (weak) norms. A (male) systems administrator created the group.
[27] Patricia Roberts, "Soc.feminism vote," posted to news.groups Usenet newsgroup, May 28, 1989, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/news.groups/fOlajIPTs3g/discussion.

would pass before that moderated newsgroup, soc.feminism, would change its charter in 1993 to bar anti-feminist articles, regardless of how courteously composed.[28]

In the intervening years, meta-discussion of the appropriateness of anti-feminist articles, the ratio of contributions from men and women, and the punitive tone of debates would become firmly entrenched as a staple of net.women, later renamed soc.women.[29] Efforts to cordon off particularly inflammatory topics would result in the creation of a number of other newsgroups, including net.abortion (renamed talk.abortion), talk.rape, and soc.men. Meanwhile net.women.only was seen as a failure almost immediately, not least of all because the first post came from a self-identified man—as did the second, who wrote to point this out.[30] Many more posts from men would follow, but there were other problems as well: meta-discussion of the appropriateness of topics discussed in net.women.only were repeatedly raised in both net.women.only and net.women, and traffic declined sharply after the creation of a feminist mailing roughly six months after .only was created.[31]

The Complaint

Throughout the history glossed above, a familiar complaint would be repeated: men dominated the net. Some of this was couched in terms of the ratio of men and women posting. For example:

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[28] Cindy Tittle Moore, "New Charter," posted to soc.feminism Usenet newsgroup, September 10, 1993, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.feminism/AmAKNEJWV2w/discussion.
[29] The "Great Renaming" of 1986 replaced the original, relatively "flat" naming hierarchy with a new hierarchy that attempted to distinguish between general, technical/scientific, and leisure-type newsgroups.
[30] Ken Arnold, "finally - (nf)," posted to net.women.only Usenet newsgroup, August 28, 1993, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.women.only/LzboKtZbn3Y/2aw72CFhZ7AJ.
[31] Indeed, net.women.only would come to serve primarily as a way for people to learn of and request a subscription to FeMail. Following the creation of a regular Usenet article alerting existing users to the existence of FeMail, net.women.only was decidedly defunct and so deleted, without protest, in 1985.

> When I first started reading news, I just assumed that net.women would be mostly women discussing issues of concern to women. What I found was interesting, but not exactly mostly women discussing concerns of women. In fact, it seemed like almost all men contributing to the discussion.[32]

Similarly, Karla Rikansrud reports having "ignor[ed] most this newsgroup for a while, because of the plethora of male-submitted, uninteresting articles," before going on to explain that she:

> decided to go through some articles and tally up the submitters... Of the first 141 articles: 41 were from women [and] 100 were from men... I did the same thing to the next 142 articles, this time: 34 were from women [and] 108 were from men...[33]

Others couched men's "domination" in terms of men redirecting discussion to men's concerns. For example, in advocating the creation of net.men, Gordon Moffett wrote:

> I think that specific issues of maleness in our society go undiscussed, or (in this case) now dominate net.women! The flood of articles about men and their penises in net.women is the clearest sign of this problem.[34]

In a similar vein, one woman speaking of both the soc.women and moderated soc.feminism newsgroup, prior to its ban on even "civil" anti-feminist articles, wrote:

> they're both dominated by… men saying "you think *you've* got it bad - let me tell you about my troubles." There is a tendency to trivialize women's problems, and not to listen to what women are saying. I find it curious (well, not that curious, really) that we didn't hear men complaining about the horrible burdens that come with power until women starting complaining vociferously about being disenfranchised.[35]

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[32] Liz Allen, "net.women.only."
[33] RikansrudKB (Karla Rikansrud), "men dominate net.women (flame-ish)," posted to net.women Usenet newsgroup, August 15, 1985, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/K9K8SB14kr8/discussion. Incidentally, this message is visible in Figure 1 above.
[34] Gordon Moffet, "net.men??? yes(!)"posted to net.women and net.news.group Usenet newsgroups, January 19, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.news.group/CWSCc72RtOg/discussion.
[35] Fred Homan, "Opression of one is opression of all (was Re: fear and," posted to soc.women, January 9, 1991, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.women/HCgULbd2oLs/discussion.

Relatedly, feminists repeatedly spoke of feeling stuck teaching the same "Intro to Women's Liberation, 101" class over and over.[36] For example, Sophie Quigley wrote:

> It seems to me that right now, net.women serves more as a forum where some women (and men) have to explain to some men some very basic feminist ideas. It doesn't seem right to me.[37]

Finally, several noted that domination also took the form of insisting upon a particular mode of discourse. "Ms. Sunny Kirstin," a self-identified transgender woman elaborates:

> The entire net is dominated by men struggling for power... Not the kind of numerical domination appropriate to equal opportunity... Rather, it is the kind of domination reflective of the male domain… that of domination by most successful contention. [O]r, to use *YOUR* [prior correspondent, Andy's] words: "You will have to prove that you are equal to me on a level playing field."
>
> You see, Andy... in this forum, women don't want to prove anything. We don't want to *have* to prove anything. And everytime men enter the forum, it becomes a game of domination, rightness, superiority, power. And that is why there are so few women posting in this forum. Because the kind of communication which is cooperative and sharing, the kind which comes naturally to women, is impossible...[38]

While it's certainly true—as many were quick to assure complainants— that other groups had similar problems with "garbage and uneducated posting," "silly postings," and so on,[39] these complaints would be echoed in scholarship on "women's speech" and CMC, which found that there were higher rates of participation from men in women's forums,

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[36] RikansrudKB (Karla Rikansrud), "men dominate net.women (flame-ish)."
[37] Sophie Quigley, "net.[wo]men[.only] and controlled women," posted to net.women Usenet newsgroup, January 22, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/IAgZw3Etrq0/discussion.
[38] Ms. Sunny Kirsten, contribution to topic thread beginning with RikansrudKB (Karla Rikansrud) "men dominate net.women (flame-ish)," August 19, 1985 (cite above).
[39] Brad Templeton, "Would women please get the hell out of net.women (Satire)" posted to net.women Usenet newsgroup, August 16, 1985, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/39vXei4CysI/discussion.

that men often redirected discussions to the validity or relevance of women's experiences, and that men tended to use a more argumentative style.[40]

The complaint of "male dominance" functioned, as Deem and Berlant suggest, to contain feminist discourse and prevent it from "engag[ing] the public sphere writ large." Indeed, the search for a solution would propel many into the "private" CMC of mailing groups and restricted forums. Ms. Sunny Kirstin explains:

> after net.women failed... net.women.only was created… to keep the men from "dominating" the conversation... And when men again refused to respect the charter of the newsgroup known as net.women.only... read by all, posted to only by women... the women of the net gave up and left the net. That is why there is a successful moderated mailing list being operated whose main focus is feminist issues.

Despite the failure of net.women.only, women's only groups remained a popular alternative to "public" forums. Perhaps acquainted with net.women.only, other women-only CMC platforms sought means of barring entry to those who could not confirm that they were women. For example, the Women on the WELL (WOW) conference[41] required—and, in fact, still requires—"verification" that one is a woman. Verification is

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[40] Ellen Balka, "Women's Access to On-line Discussions about Feminism," *Electronic Journal of Communication* 3, no. 1 (1993), http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/v3n193.htm; Maureen Majella Ebben, "Women on the Net: An exploratory study of gender dynamics on the soc. women computer network" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1994); Susan Herring, "Gender and Democracy in Computer-Mediated Communication," *Electronic Journal of Communication* 3, no. 2 (1993), http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/v3n293.htm; Susan Herring, "Posting in a Different Voice: Gender and Ethics in Computer-Mediated Communication," in Ess, *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication*, 115-45; Susan Herring, "The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment On-line," *The Information Society* 15, no. 3 (1999), 151-167; Susan Herring et al., "Searching for Safety Online: Managing 'Trolling' in a Feminist Forum." *The Information Society* 18, No. 5 (2002), 371-384; Judy Smith and Ellen Balka, "Chatting on a Feminist Network," in Kramarae, *Technology and Women's Voices*, 82-97; Dale Spender, *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*;; Laurel Sutton, "Using Usenet: Gender, Power, and Silence in Electronic Discourse" (proceedings of the 20th annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, Berkeley, CA, 1994); Margie Wylie, "No Place for Women: Internet Is Flawed Model for the Infobahn," *Digital Media* 4, no. 8 (1995), 3-6.

[41] Only those who (also) had access to the WELL bulletin board service would be able to access this conference. The WELL began offering access to the Usenet in June 1985. See: Ron Pernick, "A Timeline of the First Ten Years of The WELL," *The WELL*, 1995, http://www.well.com/conf/welltales/timeline.html.

achieved by providing a contact phone number so one's voice can be confirmed to be that of a woman, or having an existing member vouch for one's identity as a woman.[42]

On the SAPPHO mailing list, an offshoot of soc.women created in the late 1980s, discursive style and self-presentation were used as a litmus test of one's womanhood and thus belonging. When a new subscriber asked how one's gender could be determined online, an existing subscriber responded, explaining: "As I recall, we use the old McCarthyist definition: If it looks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, well then it's a duck. (Looks on e-mail result in things like questions about atypical names.)"[43] Here the respondent's parenthetical elaborates how one might "look" like a woman on online: use a "typical," that is feminine-gendered name or handle.[44]

However, feminine-gendered self-presentation was not sufficient evidence of a contributor's gender: participants were also expected to "quack like a duck," that is, discursively engage each other as women. "Talk[ing] like a man," as one contributor described it, was variously alarming, out-of-place, and grounds for removal.[45] This included being argumentative; flaming or disparaging ideas or persons one disagreed with; presenting oneself as an authority by, for example, avoiding language like "seems" that would soften the force of one's claims; and taking up too much space by contributing more frequently and/or writing longer posts.[46] When a woman's manner of speaking was "masculine," as with one conventionally female-named SAPPHO

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[42] Email and telephone correspondence with current Women on the WELL coordinator, Kathleen Pope, September 13, 2014–October 6, 2014.
[43] Unnamed 1, excerpt of email to SAPPHO discussion list (1993), quoted in Kira Hall, "Cyberfeminism," in Herring, *Computer Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, 159.
[44] Conventionally masculine or ambiguously gendered contributors like one participant, "James," could be pushed to justify use of the handle.
[45] Unnamed 2, excerpt of email to SAPPHO discussion list (1993), quoted in Hall, "Cyberfeminism," 159.
[46] Hall, "Cyberfeminism"; Herring, "Posting in a different voice: Gender and ethics in computer-mediated communication."

subscriber, only in-person verification of gender was sufficient to "calm" the controversy created by her masculine flaming.[47]

By contrast, the feminist mailing list, mail.feminism or FeMail, was proposed in net.women by Judy McMullan in February 1984 and created shortly thereafter for the discussion of feminist issues regardless of gender.[48] Contributions were subject to moderation in line with FeMail's goal of providing not a "women only" space but rather a "woman-space." Men were welcome, but given guidelines for contributing, including "talk[ing] about women's issues, not how women's issues affect[ed] men."[49] Messages that did not meet expectations could be edited or omitted by the moderator who also personally distributed FeMail.[50]

Public Man, Private Women?

In "containing" feminist speech, the complaint of male dominance would also become an important site for affirming dominant masculine conceptions of publicness and linking these to particular CMC spaces and speakers. For the most part, early efforts to create spaces for women to speak amongst each other or to discuss feminist issues

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[47] The same respondent quoted above explains in more detail: "when J. [an anonymized handle] first joined sappho… [s]he upset and offended so many people, there was concern that she was really a man. *Lots* of concern… Anyway, it finally calmed down when someone from So. Cal. posted saying that while they founder her offensive too, they had met her and she was a woman."[47]

[48] Judy McMullan, "proposed 'mail' newsgroup for feminists," February 15, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women.only/YG3kfBxqkmU/discussion. Net.women contributor, Marie Care, reports the list has "already been started" in a March 13, 1984 posting (see: Marie Carey, March 13, 1984, contribution to topic thread beginning with(klt), "mailing list," posted to UseNet net.women.only newsgroup, March 11, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women.only/q2iwPVbakS0/discussion.)

[49] Unnamed, excerpt to FeMail mailing list (1991), quoted in Balka, "Women Talk Goes Online," 236.

[50] Initially, Judy McMullan, who proposed the creation of FeMail, served as the coordinator-moderator. In June 1986, two new coordinator-moderators took McMullan's place. Judy McMullan, "feminist mailing list," November 5, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women.only/hKAqp5NjKYM/discussion.

lent themselves to a narrative of women as essentially different from men, but also a monolithic collective. This is most striking in the private women-only mailing lists where good or desirable relations between strangers were imagined to unfold naturally. However, FeMail would not be entirely immune to these gendered dichotomies. Consider that it would become common sense that mailing lists—including those, like FeMail, which had no formal bars to access—were "private."[51]

What's more, FeMail and net.women.only were conflated in revealing ways. Some, but in particular the women who had envisioned FeMail as a mailing list for women only, suggested they forget the mailing list and simply repurpose net.women.only for the discussion of feminism, thereby implying a mailing list that admitted men could not be substantively different from a public newsgroup, re-inscribing men as "public."[52]

Others called for the deletion of net.women.only on grounds that it no longer served a purpose (and, implicitly, had never been appropriate for the Usenet). User Don Stanwyck wrote:

> Again, I call for the decease of the group. There exists a mailing list where people can do what they want. Those who are not willing to trade ideas in the marketplace, should not have a stall there.[53]

As the above suggests, women and feminists struggled to find a public CMC platform to discuss women's rights and gender equality, which seemed to confirm the private or at least special-interest nature of their discussions.

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[51] The first (ARPANet) mailing lists did not appear to be read this way, even when they circulated in a similar fashion.
[52] Beth Mazur, "New Suggestions about Mail List - (nf),"February 23, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women.only/kp2itvuRSNg/discussion; Lisa, "New Suggestions about Mail List - (nf)," March 1, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women.only/DXQdZ3etPAk/discussion.
[53] Don Stanwyck, contribution to topic thread beginning with "Sex prejudice, what else? - (nf)," March 19, 1984, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/CIrOqkBc-Go/discussion.

Meanwhile, women and feminists were routinely offered a clear vision of public speech, which they could join in at any time. For example, responding to the proposal for net.women.only, Alan Hu wrote:

> ...the main point for having net.women.only is to have a forum for women. Why not make net.women fill this need? Nothing prevents any of you females out there from making [net.women] a group for women. You just have to contribute articles for women. If some rude, obnoxious person flames at you, flame back. That's what we all do in every other group.[54]

As an alternative to flaming, women were also instructed to "ignore [flames]" and "continue your discussion with the people interested in carrying on a reasonable and thought-provoking discussion."[55] Often women who "duke[d] it out with the best of them" on Usenet and did not complain about net.women were offered as exemplars and proof of women's abilities should they just choose to use them.[56]

On the one hand, because there were no formal barriers to participation on Usenet, women were free to speak of what they pleased in whatever way they pleased. In effect, this meant women were free to participate as everyone else did: to argue in a fashion that "all" would find persuasive, that is, without reference to identity or personal experience; to not be offended; to direct their time and energy to persuading, flaming, or filtering out, to the best of their ability, anti-feminist topics or contributors; and to not sign on if they did not like it or couldn't handle it. On the other hand, women and

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[54] Alan Hu, August 24, 1983, contribution to topic thread beginning with Liz Allen, "net.women.only," posted to net.women and net.news.groups Usenet newsgroups, August 19, 1983, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/lw9bfkm0424/discussion.
[55] Michael J. Fremont, contribution to topic thread beginning with Christine Guzy, "net.feminsts," posted to net.women Usenet newsgroup, August 25, 1983, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/JTPkuuEOvqE/discussion.
[56] Ed Pawlak, "Who needs net.women.only?" posted to net.women Usenet newsgroup, August 2, 1983, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/net.women/6Pq06c2i3Fo/discussion.

feminists could abscond to CMC deemed private, confirming the inappropriateness of women's or a more conventionally feminine mode of speech for public CMC and the characterization of feminist as a "special," non-general interest. (By contrast, a newsgroup like net.chess might not capture everyone's interest but, owing to its recognizably "public" status could be thought of as formally, potentially "for everyone.") There was no clear way to be "dangerous." The following section explores an individual feminist provocateur who managed to become so.

V. "Without Regard to Sex": The Minor Rhetoric of Mark Ethan Smith

At times eloquent, often fervent, even feverish, Mark Ethan Smith entered the burgeoning publics of computer-mediated communication "speak[ing] too much… out of place and outside the truth."[57] These are Jacques Rancière's words for describing the speech of those who "have no part," whose person and claims have no place in the distribution of the sensible.[58] Smith's strident, feminist speech—sometimes trafficking, when pressed, in colorful slurs like "Nazi penis worshipper" and hasty generalizations like "[t]hese are the same kind of guys who take time off from developing nuclear weapons to molest children or harass women"—was sufficient to make him an outsider in the context of early CMC.[59] Being a long-term unemployed, formerly homeless, and disabled person who would speak of these things when relevant, Smith was far from the typical CMC user.

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[57] Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, 24.
[58] Ibid., 24-5.
[59] Mark E. Smith, "Warning: Offensive to techies," March 11, 1988, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.women/6gj8v0K9ZHQ/discussion. I can find no Usenet articles where Smith uses the language "Nazi penis worshippers"; he is attributed with saying this in Katie Hafner's "The Epic Saga of The Well: The World's Most Influential Online Community (And It's Not AOL)" *Wired*, 5.5 (May 1997), http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/5.05/ff_well_pr.html.

However, it was his living and speaking "without regard to sex" that resulted in his being something of a pariah. Smith was (and is) gender non-conforming. While he legally changed his name, cut his hair short, and began dressing in a conventionally masculine manner, he did not identify as a man or male.[60] He describes his decision to adopt these conventional markers of manhood in bluntly pragmatic terms: being perceived or "passing" as a man was a means to draw closer to the promise of equality, to avoid gendered assault and harassment, to improve his opportunities for employment, to move uninhibitedly through public spaces, and to be perceived and treated as an individual.

Even so, he did not "renounc[e] [his female] sex."[61] In the context of CMC, this meant Smith would mention he was a woman or had "female genitalia" when relevant to a discussion, while demanding to be addressed by conventionally masculine pronouns (he/him), citing their grammatical use as "inclusive."[62] It was in this sense that he spoke outside the distribution of the sensible, that is, that he assumed a nonsensical, or not-yet-recognizable subject position and yet spoke. Indeed, for a time, he was prolific, espousing his views in several Usenet newsgroups and at least four regionally based bulletin board services, including the WELL.

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[60] Mark Ethan Smith, "Censorship in Cyberspace," personal webpage, February 1, 2002, http://www.angelfire.com/bc3/dissident/(accessed June 15, 2015); *Smith v. Chater*, Unites States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, November 17, 1995, filed December 29, 1995, No. 94-55685.
[61] Mark Ethan Smith, July 31, 1988, contribution to topic thread beginning with Robert H. Averack, "Language in a Requirements Specification," posted to comp.society.women Usenet newsgroup, July 28, 2998, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/comp.society.women/x-vMBDDHDgk/discussion.
[62] Mark E. Smith, July 18, 1988, contribution to topic thread beginning with Mark E. Smith, "Proposed Lawsuit," July 17, 1998, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.women/NLUs2u11X_s/discussion; Mark E. Smith, "Sexism in Judaism?", March 22, 1989, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.culture.jewish/9fOvqqspdHU/discussion. Smith generally used the terms "woman" and "female" interchangeably to indicate a human with female sex or genitalia.

Many men and women accepted Smith's preferred pronouns, most did not. As a result, Smith's sex was often noted or implied to be female by others. Some announced that they had received email correspondence alerting them to Smith's sex. Most commonly, interlocutors would simply refer to Smith using conventionally feminine pronouns, a combination of pronouns (s/he, she/he/it, (s)he, etc.), or "it." Others placed Smith's name in quotes or otherwise signaled to those viewing the discussion that there was something amiss with *this* Mark. For example, David Schnedar, opts to reproduce Smith's signature when referring to him, figuring it as a concession to Smith:

> Acording to --Mark, you have to call me by a name or pronoun of my choice. In the future please refer to me as: 'THE GRAND PUBA, MASTER OF ALL HE SEES OR THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE WHICHEVER IS BIGGER' Or use this as a pronoun when refering to me: 'THE ONE WHO'S NAME MUST NOT BE SPOKEN' …
>
> I use '—Mark' because --Mark does. --Mark seems to be real picky about how I refer to --Mark, but --Mark hasn't posted --Mark's prefered method of address lately. --Mark, please post the syntax and semantics --Mark would prefer us to use when refering to --Mark. Can I please use 'you.' Not using it is very difficult.[63]

The parallel Schnedar constructs between Smith wanting to be referred to by a conventionally masculine name and pronouns, on the one hand, and Schnedar being referred to as "THE GRAND PUBA…" on the other, recasts Smith's argument about equality to the comic eccentricity of someone who has shifting and inexplicable preferences.[64] The repeated use of "--Mark" results in awkward, stilted prose, which functions to mark the inappropriateness and questionable "reality" of Smith but may also

[63] David Schnedar, contribution to topic thread beginning with Mark E. Smith, July 17, 1988, "Proposed Lawsuit," July 17, 1988, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.women/NLUs2u11X_s/discussion.
[64] Schnedar typically included "The Grand PUBA Master Of The Entire Universe" in his signature; "THE ONE WHO'S NAME MUST NOT BE SPOKEN" was something he appears to have come up with for this email.

be read as a way of materializing on the screen an authorial distaste and discomfort that was presumed to be shared.

Invariably these methods of (mis)addressing or (mis)referencing Smith would generate replies and often flames. Some asked whether Smith was "real or an elaborate (and long-standing) hoax" or a "pseudo," short for pseudonym and used to indicate the specified sex of the individual was suspect.[65] Smith would aggressively defend his "reality" and his "right" to be called by inclusive, conventionally masculine pronouns, arguing that to do otherwise was to discriminate on the basis of sex.

Smith would become infamous in several early computer-mediated communication platforms for the varied means by which he asserted the reality and coherence of his subject position. He is credited with making a community of the WELL, the bulletin-board service discussed in Chapter One, by giving key members and systems administrators something they could share and organize in response to: frustration with his unconventional behaviors and aggressive outspokenness.[66] He was also denied access to at least two other bulletin board services.

In a move echoing that of the WELL's management, one Usenet veteran, Brian Reid, invited readers to see themselves as "a real community" through a shared response to the "absurdity" of an article by Smith titled "Proposed Lawsuit," in which he

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[65] Jim Rees, "Mark Ethan Smith: For real?" posted to net.admin Usenet newsgroup, September 28, 1987, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/news.admin/dBXRlBfRtac/discussion; Rhonda Scribner, "Re: The Difference It Makes . . .", posted to talk.politics.misc, alt.flame & soc.women Usenet newsgroups, January 27, 1998, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.women/K1S5vjc1rLQ/discussion.

[66] This was an oft-repeated notion of some key members and vocal emissaries from the WELL, notably Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993) and Tom Mandel, who is central to Katie Hafner's account of this BBS. Both individuals were interviewed and the idea echoed in Hafner's *The WELL: A Story of Love, Death & Real Life in the Seminal Online Community*, 2001. Hafner apparently made no effort to locate Smith who would respond to Hafner's book in "Censorship in Cyberspace" (full citation in footnote 59), as well as via a public WELL conference.

threatened to sue multiple people on grounds of sex discrimination. Reid wrote: "This incident is just further proof that USENET is a real community. Now we have our own Bag Lady."[67] The reference to a "Bag Lady" plays on gendered, classed and ablist tropes, casting Smith's fervent prose as on par with the inarticulate and utterly dismissible ravings of the sort of individual that would likely be beneath most participants' notice, if not an object of their disgust.

Usenet's (increasingly) decentralized character made "management" near impossible, so no community cohered in finding a means to ban Smith.[68] But threatening a lawsuit was in some sense the ultimate taboo on Usenet, and so drew a great deal of attention. Replies multiplied until a substantial number of articles began addressing not Smith, but how to get away from him:

> this is getting out of hand. you can't get away from this person. i've already added
> /usr/lib/news/expire -f [Smith's email address]
> to my daily expirations, and the lines
> /From: [Smith's email address]/:j
> /From: [Smith's secondary email address]/:j
> to my News/KILL file, but still these postings get thru. what do you have to do to stop paying for MES's ravings on your own system???[69]

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[67] Brian Reid, "lawsuit," contribution to topic thread beginning with Mark E. Smith, "Abusenet--Reply to Karl Denninger and other Libertarians. (Was: Re: The Rhetoric of Cruelty)," posted to news.admin, misc.legal & soc.women Usenet newsgroups, July 18, 1988, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/news.admin/Pc_4Jo259dE/discussion.

[68] As on the WELL, a community of "old-timers" cohere in remembrance of Smith. Indeed, Smith is regularly referenced in participant-made histories, "legends," and lists of "kooks" of Usenet. For example: William VanHorne, "Net.Legends List (long)," posted to alt.folklore.urban, alt.folklore.computers, alt.usenet.kooks, March 16, 1994, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/alt.usenet.kooks/VYe-kn0UcVI/discussion.

[69] John F. Haugh II, "Proposed Lawsuit," July 17, 1988, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.women/NLUs2u11X_s/discussion.

This code would ensure articles written by Smith under his most commonly used email address would expire soon after receipt and anything written by Smith under that address and another known address would be automatically disposed of, or "junked." The latter would only affect Haugh's computer, but the former could limit the downstream distribution of Smith's articles.[70]

Nonetheless, it clearly was proving inadequate to the task of "get[ing] away from" Smith.

Others took to advocating a form of collective action aimed at "cutting Mark's dribble off at the source." Michael Duebner advised, first, that all readers resolve to "ignor[e[]" Smith's posts and, second, that all systems administrators run the expire filter "immediately after unbatching incoming news."[71] In elaborating why preventing the dissemination of Smith's articles was necessary, despite the highly prized value of freedom to "say anything," the author references the disability support Smith is known to receive, asserting that:

> Carrying the Mark E. Smith traffic has to cease purely for financial reasons. First we support Mark via our tax dollars. Then we see our tax dollars being put to use insulting us and we are paying to propagate the trash throughout the net.

Schnedar, who had previously referred to Smith as "--Mark" posted a day later, writing:

> Mark, I have the solution to your problem. Anyone who wants to be refer[r]ed to by a certain set of words and not by others need only to run usenet through a filter. Here is one for consideration.
>
> ```
> %%
> " "she" "       printf("he");
> " "hers" "      printf("his");
> ```

[70] The spotty but still extant archived articles from or responding to Smith may well be a testament to how extensive efforts were to not see anything from or about him; many articles reference earlier articles that are not available in the extensive Usenet archive held by Google.
[71] Michael Duebner, "A rational approach to Mark E. Smith," July 18, 1998, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/news.admin/4pEYrx4ICbc/discussion.

```
" "she$printf("he");
" "hers$        printf("his");
^she            printf("he");
^hers           printf("his");
David           printf("The Grand PUBA Master Of The Entire Universe");
```

Schnedar's mocking tone is replaced by an effort to "solv[e]" Smith's "problem," which an offer to aid in implementing or improving the filter suggests is sincere. Whether this change is the result of concern that Smith's "proposed lawsuit" might have traction or Schnedar is genuinely persuaded of the validity of Smith's "problem," Schnedar again obscures what is at the heart of Smith's desire for conventionally masculine pronouns: a claim to equality.

On Schnedar's new framing, Smith's desire reflects an individual preference on par with others' preference to continue using pronouns "appropriate" to Smith's sex. Figured in this way, rather than as a claim to equality, Schnedar offers the promise of a—if not perfect, then perfectible—program that will allow everyone to get what they want. In effect, Schnedar says: Smith is free to be a "he" on his own screen.

As a practice of publicity, Schnedar's filter anticipates and cultivates atomistic, self-helping individuals who stand in no particular relation of obligation or care to strangers addressed. While this use of a filter is unique, the embrace of technology as a work-around to fundamentally incompatible visions of the good (for Usenet and beyond it) was a defining feature of Usenet and continues to be pervasive in the context of CMC. Indeed, in offering the fix, Schnedar could be said to be more nearly treating Smith as an individual and equal. By contrast, Smith being unemployed and on disability, Duebner

has no trouble treating Smith as a sub-equal. But Smith remained uncontainable until his relocation to San Diego resulted in a loss of regular access.[72]

Smith's Minor Rhetoric

I suggest we read Smith's speech, like Deem reads Solanas's SCUM Manifesto, as a minor rhetoric. The atomistic individual who takes up new technology in order to masterfully reshape his world reflected the lived reality of many who built, read, and contributed articles to the burgeoning publics CMC afforded. These individuals easily saw themselves as being, or at least being reflected, in the "technical core" of Usenet. They used software, filters, and coded patches to actively shape their interface with Usenet's CMC publics to reflect their interests, investments, and preferences. And it worked, for the most part; but not with Smith. In this way, Smith displaced the feminist CMC complaint of domination onto the broader network.

Like Solanas, Smith "use[d] the language of the majority in such a way as to make that language stutter… slow down… halt." Taking seriously the historical use and grammatical definition of masculine pronouns as "inclusive," Smith claimed a legal right to them and his conventionally masculine (legal) name, "while not renouncing [his female] sex."[73] In defending this right, he affected an aggressively masculine style, browbeating interlocutors with condescending, legalistic, and rationalistic explanations. For example, responding to one individual who suggested Smith had a "male name,"

[72] Email correspondence with Mark Ethan Smith, July 2015.
[73] Mark Ethan Smith, July 31, 1988, contribution to topic thread beginning with Robert H. Averack, "Language in a Requirements Specification," posted to comp.society.women, July 28, 1988, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/comp.society.women/x-vMBDDHDgk/discussion.

Smith wrote: "Oh? Does my name have genitalia? What makes it male? I do not use a male name. Names do not have genitals, therefore they do not have sex."[74]

As the above suggests, Smith's explanations brought a seemingly private matter—genitals—to the fore, uncomfortably illustrating the ways in which it these were always already being made present. For example, Smith informed one author that he could "still mention [his] sex if he need[ed] to" by "simply say[ing]" things like "'Even though he is a woman, kids, Mark is right."[75] When including excerpts from prior articles in which he was misaddressed, Smith might replace "she/her" with "(sexual term)" or "[D.P]," Smith's abbreviation for "diminutive pronouns," that is, conventionally feminine pronouns.[76] Alternatively, he would respond "in kind," referring to those with conventionally masculine names using "diminutive" pronouns, always making a point to explain what he was doing.

However imperfectly, Smith destabilized the otherwise robust link between male sex and men/the masculine as well as that between females and "women's speech;" but he did so by rejecting all that is conventionally gendered feminine and reinforcing a conception of the democratic speaker as masculine, through his practices of public speech. The effect of the latter was compounded by Smith's inability to materialize the "privacy" of his female sex, referenced by interlocutors who resisted his "right" to conventionally masculine pronouns but also by those who supported him. Indeed, supporters frequently shared personal information obtained from Smith in private email,

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[74] Mark E. Smith, March 25, 1989, contribution to topic thread beginning with Mark E. Smith, "Sexism in Judaism," March 22, 1989, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.culture.jewish/Kwc2T-pZNTM/discussion.
[75] Deem, "Stranger Sociability, Public Hope, and the Limits of Political Transformation," 447.
[76] Mark Ethan Smith, March 22, 1989, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.culture.jewish/Kwc2T-pZNTM/discussion.

including a history with sexual assault, thus setting Smith up as exceptional in a way that made his sex quite present and recasting his living "without regard to sex" as a reactionary survival tactic warranting compassion, rather than as an emancipatory project.

Contesting the practices of publicity which excluded him, Smith nonetheless remained unrecuperable by a broader feminist public that was unwilling or unable to use his tactics, which required a great deal of time and surely also emotional and other labor. Even so, in his claiming of masculine pronouns without "renouncing his sex," Smith can be understood to have produced a minor rhetoric. Equally important, Smith was something of an object lesson for feminists on Usenet, almost all of whom tolerated, if not supported, Smith's use of masculine pronouns. In responses to Smith they saw a commitment among anti-feminists and also among supporters of women's rights, to police gender boundaries. Where prior "academic" discussions of pronouns had invariably resulted in many favoring the use of masculine pronouns as "inclusive" and so fit to speak of both women and men, reactions to Smith made clear that most did not see these terms as quite so capacious or flexible. Harassment directed at Smith also illustrated the limits of a minor rhetoric to affect change. Finally, it was in the course of a flame war with Smith that the prospect of moderating soc.women began to appear more desirable to the readership and had previously resisted the notion.

VI. The Genesis of soc.feminism & Safe Space as a Feminist Counter-Public Practice

Moderation was suggested early on in net.women's history. However it wasn't until late 1983 that the UseNet software was updated to include a moderated newsgroup option, and it would be several more years before it was truly operational.[77] By that time, rules for forming newsgroups had solidified, making it difficult—especially for feminists—to secure the votes needed to start a moderated group. An additional concern in what could be expected to be a high-volume group was the workload and time commitment, not to mention the emotional labor of having to moderate bigoted submissions. Nonetheless, a moderated soc.feminism was created in May 1989 following assurances that anti-feminist contributions that were not flames would be welcome and the creation of a software patch that would allow for multiple moderators.[78]

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[77] Although the mod hierarchy was intended to be circulated worldwide, alongside the net* and fa* hierarchies (the latter allowed UseNet to "host" or display the contents of ARPAnet mailing lists), there were distribution difficulties immediately. Sites running versions older software could not recognize the *mod hierarchy. Even when a site was running updated Netnews software, "mod" needed to be added to the distribution list. Regardless of the cause, if a site that failed to receive and distribute mod* also served as a distribution node for one or more downstream sites, the latter would fail to receive moderated groups even if their software was up-to-date and included mod in its distribution. In the months following the creation of the mod hierarchy, reports of missing mod groups were common. These reports would slow, but not disappear until the deletion of the mod hierarchy shortly after the "Great Renaming" of 1986. Even when distribution paths were correct, moderated groups faced other difficulties due to the technical affordances of UseNet's Netnews software, which was designed to facilitate unmoderated posting. Those wishing to contribute to a moderated group were asked to send articles to the designated moderator, knowledge of which would require one had already encountered an article providing this information. By contrast, when posting to an unmoderated newsgroup one addressed the newsgroup. In other words, knowledge of the newsgroup (e.g., net.women) simultaneously provided knowledge of where to direct an article (net.women). In late 1986, a new version of the Netnews was released that automatically forwarded articles sent to a moderated newsgroup on to the designated moderator. However, even years later individuals were advised to address the moderator directly as not all sites were running newer software.

[78] From the FAQ: "The original proposer of soc.feminism was Patricia Roberts, who collected the votes, worked with Greg Woods to set up a program allowing multiple moderators and chose the initial moderators. We were the first multiply moderated group." Cindy Tittle Moore, "soc.feminism Information," soc.feminism [Usenet newsgroup], March 3, 1992, https://groups.google.com/d/topic/soc.feminism/paZQjrVfS2A/discussion, (accessed December 17, 2015).

For the most part, soc.feminism was for discussion of feminism, not a feminist newsgroup. Even though moderators were required to publish anti-feminist contributions as long as they avoided ad hominem attacks, rejected articles became sources of lengthy discussion in soc.women and even several of the "general" newsgroups to which all users were advised to subscribe.. In 1992, many expressed a desire for the group to narrow its focus, in effect, to "address people as [feminists]." Soc.feminism began regularly posting articles reflecting this change and including recommended reading and a "FAQ" or "Frequently Asked Questions" list. Heated resistance from anti-feminists who were effectively being pushed out led to the creation of alt.feminism. Soc.feminism formally changed its charter in 1993 and remained active, albeit with slowing activity, through early 2006 (the last post is dated 2009).

VII. Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how political imaginary was circumscribed not only by dominant masculine-gendered ideals of publicness, but also by the materialization of these ideals in the digital "spaces" afforded by CMC. In this case, becoming "dangerous, as Deem puts it, required either an (unsustainable) disruption through "inappropriate" adoption and corruption of dominant ideals (Zerilli would call this an "anomaly"[79]) or collective action to create a public space apart.

Many of the practices developed in soc.feminism will be seen in the feminist counter-public practice discussed in Chapter Three. But there will also be a number of differences. In this sense, Frances Shaw's argument, noted in my introductory chapter,

[79] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 49.

that online "safe spaces" represent a counter-hegemonic practice in disallowing anti-feminist speech doesn't quite go far enough, at least in that portion of the feminist blogosphere I study. As will be shown, the "safe spaces" of online feminism develop through conflict and negotiation of safety in feminist blogs that were (and still are, to some extent) created and managed by white, middle-class, college-educated, cisgendered women, but serve increasingly serve broader audiences. Thus it would be wrong to attribute the counter-public practice of "safe space" to feminists without also attributing it to anti-racists, queers, disabled, and other individuals who challenged its occlusions.

Perhaps this will give my reader cause for concern. After all, contemporary feminist political thought and, more broadly, political theory, have been critical of the effectiveness or emancipatory potential of political speech and action that foregrounds social particulars, in short: identity politics. One way this has manifested has been in a particular question—pervasive in mainstream media and not uncommon to academic feminism—which may be put somewhat cavalierly as *whither feminism?*

The earliest and most thoroughly "troubled" response to the "whither feminism?" question suggested that it was the recognition of, or focus on, differences amongst women that led to feminism's failure or impotence via fragmentation. Among the more sustained replies to this line of thinking is Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom.* Reworking Hannah Arendt's political theory to shed light on the foundationlessness and world-building (rather than mirroring) nature of politics, Zerilli argues that the subject of feminism has never been and cannot be definitively determined. Instead, she is only ever given form in particular historical moments through word and deed.

What draws me to Zerilli is her concern, shared by Deem and Berlant, with feminist publics and political imagination. Explaining her motivations for writing *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Zerilli identifies "the feminist challenge to the androcentrism of the public sphere and the constitution of alternative spaces of freedom" as having "captured and held [her] interest."[80] What's more, her critique of identity politics is better understood as a critique of those who would derive, through *a priori* theoretical-epistemological inquiry, "the" subject of feminism. She explains:

> My point… has not been to rule out the 'what,' that is, the questions of subjectivity and identity that have preoccupied feminists. It has been to insist that the kind of transformation envisioned by thinkers who focus on these questions—if it is not to be restricted to individual cases that can then be written off as anomalies—requires the tangible and intangible political relations that Arendt calls a worldly-in-between: that which at once relates us and separates us. *It is in this space of the common world that differences become meaningful and the newly thinkable*, other ways of constituting identities and configuring social arrangements such as gender appear.[81]

I agree wholeheartedly and because I do I must also ask: what common world is being considered? Academia is, of course, a part of the common world, but its relationship to other worldly and "everyday" feminist practice is not strictly that of an expert engaging an eager layman. Nor, I imagine, would anyone think it should be.[82]

Nonetheless, we could simply say Zerilli is focused on theorizing what feminist praxis must contend with generally, while I focus on a particular, contemporary instance,

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[80] Ibid., ix.
[81] Ibid., 181 (emphasis mine).
[82] Feminist theory is taken up (or not) in some surprising ways in feminist CMC. Here's just one example: the term "kyriarchy" was coined by feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, to describe systems of multiple, overlapping oppression and subordination, not unlike intersectionality (*Discipleship of Equals a Critical Feminist Ekklesia-Logy of Liberation*). Schüssler Fiorenza's focus is on a feminist theory of power that de-centers patriarchy, rather than explaining intragroup conflict along multiple axes of identity. "Kyriarchy" became fairly common coinage in especially early 21st-century feminist CMC. However, the term has received little traction in cotemporaneous feminist theory. Thanks to Sarah Gram for this and many other thoughtful observations.

and we agree that collective feminist speech and action in public is crucial to, not only a vision of democratic subjects but also a worldly political practice that cultivates subjects who imagine freedom and the good life outside the gendered and raced logics of (much) liberal political thought. However, in opening her first chapter with the assertion that "it is increasingly hard to identify the 'movement' in the feminist movement";[83] and selecting the exceptional (in an American context[84]) worldly feminist practice of an Italian collective, the writings of French feminist author, Monique Wittig, and the decidedly dated 1843 U.S. women's summit, Zerilli can easily be read as suggesting there's little to learn from contemporary American feminist practice. In other words, one might think that American feminist practice has, like American feminist scholarship (on Zerilli's readings), stalled out in its efforts to nail down the subject of feminism as a perquisite to acting.

This impression is compounded in the chapter where Zerilli takes up the collective feminist practice of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, best known for rejecting the liberal discourse of rights. In a recurring move, Zerilli shifts between the historically situated particularities of the collectives' actions to an amorphous American feminism concretely situated, in one instance only, in the feminist theory of Wendy Brown. In this case, Zerilli writes: "The Milan feminists, too [i.e., like Brown via her Nietzschean critique of identity politics], see the dangers involved in the desire for reparations."[85] They further realized, Zerilli notes, that the problem with an "injury

[83] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 1.
[84] It is not clear that the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's rejection of a discourse of rights would be as strikingly radical when situated in its Italian context, as it is likely to read and have been read in the U.S. While Zerilli speaks to other translation issues, this is not something she addresses.
[85] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 100.

identity" lies not in its origin in lived experience of oppression or marginalization, but in not having a vision of what freedom looks like apart from liberalism.[86]

Again: "The Italians, too [where "too" situates one in "the context of American feminism" mentioned immediately above], had thought that recognizing social differences was the answer to feminism's identity politics."[87] Later, "[r]ecognizing how the 'differences among women' became, as in American feminism, an empty slogan… the Italians come face to face with the limits" of their current practice and switched gears to a practice that repurposed inequities (of class, age, and experience) amongst themselves.[88] In so doing, Zerilli concludes, they imagined and cultivated a feminist political subject embedded in relations of inter-generational care, interdependence, and obligation.

In the instances glossed above, Zerilli abstracts from the Milan collective's situated practice a series of lessons that a monolithic "American feminism" might learn. In omitting contemporary, worldly U.S. practice one is left to wonder if Zerilli imagines the theoretical quagmire of academic feminism to have resulted in a freeze of on-the-ground practices, or if instead the omission marks a judgment that worldly feminist practice should look more like the practice as developed by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective.

Whatever the reason, it's only fair to note that challenges with studying one of the major sites of public speech and appearance in the U.S. today—CMC—may well have played a role. But let me be frank in suggesting it may also owe something to the

[86] Ibid., 100, 102.
[87] Ibid., 105.
[88] Ibid., 106.

relegation of what happens in the digital spaces and publics afforded by CMC as less real, as Chapter One discussed, or even, as Chapter Four elaborates, a repugnance to the forms of political action and the types of political claims that seem to be magnified by CMC platforms.

None of this diminishes Zerilli's superb theoretical account of the relationship among worldly practice, public spaces, and political imagination, nor does it preclude the capacity of the Milan collective's practices to inspire. But, as I hope my study of feminist CMC above suggests, it does raise questions about the imagined and material space in which the collective's practices unfolded. In other words, alongside and co-constitutive of an account of women who collectively experimented with a range of practices in a (successful) effort to think outside or beyond a liberal discourse of rights, is an untheorized account of the Milan Women's Bookstore itself: the separatist space it afforded, for example, remains unaddressed, as does its situatedness in Milan and in the context of an active Left-Marxist political climate.

CHAPTER THREE

EMBODYING PUBLIC SPEECH: THE FEMINIST POLITICS OF SAFETY ONLINE

I. Introduction

In October 2009, Melissa McEwan, founder, manager, and primary contributor to the feminist blog Shakesville, received "another long-winded email" from someone who had been banned from posting comments.[1] In an (anonymized) excerpt from the email, the banned individual "admit[s] to being taken aback just a skosh."[2] He—a self-identified "white male who lives an upper-class lifestyle"—goes on to write that:

> In today's internet format of open discussion, such actions [banning a commenter] seem to run contradictory to reasoned debate. Yes I broke the cardinal rule of your site, which seems to be 'Do not under any circumstances disagree or attempt to disagree with the Commander In Chief of this site.' I say this not necessarily out of any other impulse than to acknowledge a breach of decorum. In truth I loathe most of your ideology. Such loathing isn't bred out of misogyny... No, my loathing of your site is born from contempt for the sanctimonious manner in which you post and attempt to defend such.[3]

In his own words, the author's primary complaint with Shakesville is not that it is a feminist blog, or even with being banned. To be sure, the author was caught off guard by the latter, but "just a skosh." And though he clearly thinks Shakesville's expectations for

[1] Melissa McEwan, "I Get Letters," *Shakesville,* October 23, 2009, http://www.shakesville.com/2009/10/i-get-letters_23.html (accessed December 17, 2015).
[2] Anonymous, quoted in McEwan, "I Get Letters."
[3] Ibid.

commenters are ridiculous and at odds with "reasoned debate," he acknowledges some rule breaking on his part.

It is instead the "sanctimonious manner" that accompanies the site's feminist content and is used to "defend" practices like banning that deeply unsettles the author, inspiring "loathing." What the author takes as false moral superiority is met with "contempt" which, had the author not used the term himself, is apparent in his stilted prose, choice of words (e.g., "ideology" rather than "ideas") and dismissive characterization of the site's detailed comments policy as, in brief, "don't disagree with me."

McEwan dismisses the remainder of the banned commenter's email with a perfunctory "Etc." and describes the whole as "another long-winded email from an aggrieved troll who's pissed that there's ***one space on the entirety of the internetz*** where he's not allowed to be a misogynistic fuckneck."[4]***** Noting that she "finds [his claims] hilarious" and "deeply amusing," McEwan seems to include them only as a laughable pivot to a more important matter and topic of recurring and impassioned discussion: the blog as a "safe space."[5] On this point she writes:

> This space is an experiment that could very well have started with the question: *What if people who self-selected out of most internet spaces because of alienating bigotry got together and had a conversation free from that marginalizing rubbish?*[6]

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[4] McEwan, "I Get Letters" (emphasis McEwan's).

***** Reading reminder: As noted at the beginning of chapter two, I do not use "[sic]" to indicate that grammatical or typographical errors, which are often intentional, are the authors' rather than mine. For example, McEwan's misspelling of the Internet as "the internetz") is quite clearly deliberate and functions alongside other aspects of her response to mock and convey contempt for the idea the cited email correspondent relays. Additionally, Internet trolls often use typographical errors to signal to other trolls that the post is "trolling," that is insincere and intended to generate responses that will turn the focus of a discussion away from the topic itself and to the troll (see: Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

This question, (and the manner in which it is raised) prompt several others: What would a "conversation free from … marginalizing rubbish" look like? How would it attend to the varied dimensions across which one may be marginalized? How will such an "experimental" space be created and maintained? And, finally, what insights can the study of this sort of space offer those interested in political activism in the "age of the Internet," an age in which mass publication via social media has raised concerns about the erosion of community and the commercialization or capture of citizens' attentions?[7]

Attending to the play of emotions in these sites and the means by which the sites are "built," I argue that online feminist safe spaces like Shakesville constitute a practice of feminist counter-publicity. As with all publics, counter-publics discursively structure relations between strangers; but counter-publics do so in a way that challenges norms of dominant publicity.[8] Informed by negotiations of the Internet medium and affordances of blogging platforms, bloggers and commenters at Shakesville and other feminist blogs cultivate the speaking subject of democratic discourse as embodied, vulnerable, and entangled in relations of care and obligation to the strangers being addressed.

As a practice of *counter*-publicity, the study of "safe spaces" offers insight into the persistence of inequalities online. However, in contrast with most research of this nature, often termed "digital divide" scholarship, equalities of access or training with which to make use of access are not central to my account.[9] While far from trivial, digital divide scholarship can inadvertently reinforce a form of gender essentialism and a masculine-

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[7] The Introduction to my dissertation elaborates on these concerns.
[8] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.
[9] See, for example: Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies* ; Last Moyo, "The Digital Divide: Scarcity, Inequality and Conflict," in Creeber and Martin, *Digital Cultures*, 122-138; Doug Schuler, "Reports of the Close Relationship between Democracy and the Internet May Have Been Exaggerated," in Jenkins and Thorburn, *Democracy and New Media*.

gendered ideal of public speech, both of which online feminist counter-publicity contests.[10]

Put otherwise, digital divide literature may lead one to conclude that challenges more likely to be visited upon speakers identified as women are best resolved through interventions that enable women to speak assertively (that is, "as men"), that make men more tolerant of women's differences (which can make these difference seem natural), or simply by increasing women's "representation" in CMC publics. In practice, feminists—especially those who identify as women or gender non-conforming—have found assertive speech online to be, if anything, a lightning rod for harassment, including aggressively bigoted comments, death threats, and the publication of private information, such as a home address, termed "doxxing."[11]

The chapter proceeds as follows: In the Section Two, I discuss feminist history, theorizing, and activism around safety and safe spaces. Section Three will familiarize the reader with Shakesville and the network of feminist blogs, or the feminist blogosphere, of which it is a part and which often shares in the impassioned defense and construction of online safe spaces. In Section Four I elaborate my claim that the construction of "safe spaces" online constitutes a practice of feminist counter-publicity. Finally, I conclude by considering a recurrent critique of such spaces, that they problematically reflect or continue a private and apolitical process called "therapy."

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[10] Even as I underscore here the limitations of the digital divide literature to my present analysis, it is critical to acknowledge at the same time how important that literature has been to my thinking about feminist CMC, including research on gendered and raced disparities between who gets picked up by mainstream media and who publishes and participates in online communities.
[11] Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*.

II. The Politics of Safety in Feminist Praxis

Looking to histories of feminist activism, the construction of safe spaces online is, if not expected, certainly less surprising. Appeals to safety and critiques of its unequal availability to formally equal citizens were central to feminist activism to end gendered and sexual violence, including the battered women's and anti-rape movements.[12] The construction of "safe houses" for victims was and continues to be a key component of these movements.

At the same time, the naming or expectation that other feminist spaces would be "safe" has been the subject of substantial feminist critique. Bernice Johnson Reagon's "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" offers an important early example. In this piece, Reagon argues that women's-only spaces, like the 1981 West Coast Woman's Festival where she gave a speech on "Coalition Politics," are "not safe" and instead "should be a coalition."[13] Reagon's concern was with appeals to safety being used as a cudgel to silence intra-feminist critique in the name of solidarity. Diverse, robust feminist community demanded difficult, often uncomfortable conversations about differences—for example, in race and class—that matter.

It's tempting to cordon off these two spaces—safe houses for survivors of physical assault, on the one hand, and on the other, feminist spaces which, whether physically situated or not are created from and for speech and which give shape to who "feminists" are and what they should do. However, to do so obscures shifting meanings and emotions associated with safety in these instances.

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[12] Schechter, *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement*.
[13] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, 360.

Reagon's critique rests on articulating a link between "safety" in women's-only spaces and uncomplicated, comfortable belonging. In fact, Reagon initially frames safe spaces, termed "barred rooms," as a matter of survival in societies that single out certain individuals (figured as members of a "kind") for violent, untimely death.[14] She goes on to say, however, that "[t]here is no chance that you can survive by staying *inside* the barred room."[15] Doing so doesn't alter the conditions that gave rise to the barred rooms and, in fact, makes one an easier target by increasing visibility.

As framed, Reagon's "barred rooms" facilitate survival by providing spaces apart in which to "sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And… construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society."[16] In effect, the barred room is a site of consciousness-raising (C-R) in which one develops a sense of oneself as political actor facing not isolated problems but structural inequalities.

As with many of her contemporaries who debated to what extent C-R was a form of political activism itself or only a necessary precursor, Reagon was concerned with an unwillingness to move outward from "barred rooms." Here it matters that these barred rooms were sought as a means of surviving in an oppressive society and, in Reagon's essay, that they are increasingly figured not as barred rooms but as "homes," comfortable spaces in which one finds sustenance figured in terms of maternal nourishment, like "a bottle with some milk" and "a nipple."[17]

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[14] Reagon, 357-358.
[15] Ibid., 358.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 359.

Reagon is in effect tracing the means by which demands for "safety" in the face of systemic violence developed into an expectation of comfort. This expectation in turn enabled the sidelining of those whose experience of oppression was not fully captured by their identity as women, silencing them in the name of an essential and singular group unity.[18] This is not an unfamiliar critique and it remains an important and often relevant one. However, the effectiveness of Reagon's and others' re-articulation of "safe spaces" in terms of comfortable sites of uncomplicated belonging has become an unhelpful truism detached from its development as such, and blind to instances where at times, creating safe spaces figured as homes (or that were, in fact, homes) was understood as a radical political act.

bell hooks' account of Black women's work to construct "homeplace" in the context of racist domination offers an example of the latter.[19] hooks argues that in finding time and energy to create "safe place[s]," often after laboring in the homes of white people, Black women carved out spaces where the dignity of Black people was recognized and affirmed. Implicit in hooks' account is an understanding that having a home and being human are entwined imaginaries; those without homes are more likely to be seen as animals, brutes, savages.[20]

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[18] For a historical account written at some distance from these events, see Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*.

[19] bell hooks, "Homeplace (a site of resistance)," in Ritchie and Ronald, *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, 384.

[20] hooks' account makes clear that it is white supremacy in the form of slavery, segregation, and discrimination that makes Black "home(place)lessness" a reality by co-opting the caregiving labor of, in particular, Black women. In turn, this homelessness—detached from an account of where and how the caregiving energies of Black women have been co-opted—serves as "proof" of Black people's status as less than fully human. This imaginary continues to function in accounts of the "broken home" of Black urban areas, an important point to remember as we move to touch on a final instantiation of the feminist activism in the name of safety.

Accounts of feminist organizing in the 1960s and 1970s suggests that participation in the women's movement—through C-R groups, marches, feminist separatism, etc.—was a means of creating homeplace for women from diverse backgrounds.[21] Indeed, it was the not unreasonable attachment to these newfound homeplaces that has been credited with making it all the more difficult to address differences between women.[22]

The exception to the "safe space" figured as a site of comfortable belonging has been the "safe house" and other activism framed as a response to physical assault. And yet, several recent studies—notably Kristin Bumiller's *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, Christina Hanhardt's *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, and Emily Thuma's "'Not a Wedge, But a Bridge': Prisons, Feminist Activism, and the Politics of Gendered Violence, 1968-1987"—have illustrated how feminist activism against rape and physical assault targeting women, and gay and lesbian activism against targeted assault, have created exclusions similar to those with which Reagon was concerned.[23] Indeed, these more recent accounts paint a stark picture in which the rapist or homophobic assailant came to be figured as Black or brown *criminals*, and those assaulted as white, middle- and upper-class *citizens*.

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[21] See especially Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*, 193-201; Shreve, *Women Together, Women Alone: The Legacy of the Consciousness Raising Movement*.
[22] Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*, 193-201.
[23] Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*; Emily L. Thuma, "'Not a Wedge, But a Bridge': Prisons, Feminist Activism, and the Politics of Gendered Violence, 1968-1987" (PhD diss., New York University, 2011); Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*.

Such exclusions were not an immediate or inevitable outcome. The initial conception of "safety" advocated by women and queers in the 1960s and early 1970s was safety from structural violence supported by the state through police brutality and neglect. This created potential for and, in some instances, actual coalitions between feminists, gays and lesbians, and other (of course not mutually exclusive) marginalized populations, including the poor, Black and other non-white communities, and sex workers.

However, pressure to make targeted assault visible in terms that the state and a wider society would recognize and, crucially, fund programs to address, shifted critiques away from the state and economic conditions to dangerous streets inhabited by presumptively criminal characters.[24] In effect, Bumiller and Handhardt argue these movements were co-opted by the state, which provided vital funding premised on distinguishing between criminals (framed as the product of backward minority cultures or individual psychosis) and good citizens who deserve to be safe. Meanwhile, the category of "good citizen" remains exclusive in ways that continue to undermine the goals of activists. Consider how legal, state-sanctioned responses to sexual assault continue to leave ample room for "blaming the victim" should she have been wearing a short skirt, working in the sex trade, drinking alcohol, and so on.

Uma Narayan's "Cross Cultural Connections, Border-Crossings, and 'Death by Culture'" illustrates a similar pattern unfolding in U.S. (mis)representations of dowry-murder in India, which are presented as a function of culture, detached from any account of power. The fixation on gendered violence in a distant "elsewhere" stemming from an

[24] Hanhardt in particular offers a detailed account of the social sciences imbrication in the gay and lesbian anti-violence activism.

essentially backward culture obscures the persistence of similar gendered violence "at home," namely, the murder of women by intimate partners. We might note two further effects of this fixation. First, the "death by culture" explanation facilitates imperialist "savior" narratives and policy. Second, it is used to undermine local or domestic feminist activism, as when some respond to such activism with pronouncements about the "truly" dispossessed women of the world. The latter is not an uncommon response to online feminist "safe spaces."

As the preceding elaborates, the visceral and isolated (or isolatable) reality of physical assault has served as a powerful indictment of inequality; but it can also be used to reinforce other inequalities when the safety of some is grounded on racist, classist conceptions of good citizens or intractable cultures.[25] Recognizing this does not compel us to give up on "safety." On the contrary: while having "safety" might well be an effect of power and privilege, feminist critics insist that *it should not be.*

In this sense the demand for a "safe space" may be indicative of an expectation of comfort that rests on the silencing or exclusion of the relatively disadvantage, but it may also serve as an indictment of a society that creates and brutalizes marginalized populations and as a reflection of an impetus to create a new homeplace from which to imagine other ways of being. Determining which it is—or to what extent it may be both—is not something that can be done in advance. We must instead trace the affects and effects of appeals to safety in evaluating their political possibility.

[25] Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminisms*, 83-117.

III: Shakesville and/in the Feminist Blogosphere

Broadly understood, the "feminist blogosphere" is a network of personal and community blogs that are identified as feminist or feminist-allied, increasingly including mainstream outlets with one or more regular feminist contributors.[26] Many are also described as progressive, queer, and anti-racist. In contrast to personal blogs, which feature the work of a single person who identifies as feminist,[27] community blogs have multiple contributors and typically have both more comments and more traffic.

This feminist blog network has developed over the past fifteen years coincident with the development of "Web 2.0," or the "social Internet." Concretely, the feminist blogosphere takes shape as one feminist blog connects to another. Connections take a variety of forms, but some of the most common include: embedding links to cite a post that supports or elaborates some point (in much the same way that academic writing uses citations); posting a list of links to "recommended reading"; inviting "guest posts"; providing a "blog roll," or list of recommended blogs; and commenting across sites.[28]

As has been noted, a rhetoric of safety is common to many of these sites. Indeed, many indicate they are acting politically—even radically—in constructing "safe spaces" on the Web. For example, Shakesville's McEwan writes that the "richness of contributions, encouraged by dismantling the disincentives and barriers to participation in other spaces, is the radical potential of a safe space."[29] Mia McKenzie of Black Girl

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[26] My conclusion elaborates on these distinctions.
[27] See, for example: Fannie's Room, http://fanniesroom.blogspot.com/(accessed December 17, 2015).
[28] I am in the process of generating/creating a visual representation of this network.
[29] Melissa McEwan, "On Safe Spaces and High-Hoping Fools," *Shakesville,* June 11,2009, http://www.shakesville.com/2009/06/on-safe-spaces-and-high-hoping-fools.html (accessed September 13, 2015).

Dangerous writes:

> I created this blog as an act of resistance. I created it as a way to reclaim the idea of dangerousness in a world that insists that as a black woman I am scary and aggressive and angry by default (I am angry, but it is not by default). I created this blog as a safe space for queer women of color who are tired of holding their tongues so as not to offend non-queer people of color, and white people, queer and not queer.[30]

Others speak of working to "create a space that is safe for the expression of pro-feminist ideas"[31] or "mak[ing] a safe-R space."[32]

Even when the ideal of a blog as a "safe space" is rejected because it is "impossible," it is rarely without comment or explanation, as with Feministing contributor JOS's call for an "accountable space" in a post titled "There Are No Safe Spaces."[33] And in this last case, it is not without contradiction, as Feministing's community standards indicate a commitment to "maintain a progressive and safe discourse on the site."[34]

These "safe spaces" are surprisingly fraught, eliciting a range of affectively charged responses: hope, anxiety, disappointment, contempt. What do these feminist bloggers mean when they speak of their sites in terms of "safe spaces"? Or, put otherwise: who or what do they imagine the space to be "safe" from? Who or what is it imagined as "safe" for?

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[30] Mia McKenzie, "Resistance is the Secret of Queer Joy," *Black Girl Dangerous*, May 25, 2012, http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2012/05/25/20121127resistance-is-the-secret-of-queer-joy/ (accessed December 17, 2015).
[31] "Comments Policy," *Feministe*, http://www.feministe.us/blog/comments-policy/ (accessed December 12, 2012).
[32] JenniferP, "Site Policies and FAQs," *Captain Awkward*, November 4, 2012, http://captainawkward.com/site-policies-and-faqs/ (accessed December 12, 2012).
[33] JOS, "There are No Safe Spaces," *Feministing*, August 12, 2009, http://feministing.com/2009/08/12/there-are-no-safe-spaces/(accessed December 17, 2015).
[34] "About," *Feministing*, http://feministing.com/about/ (accessed October 18, 2013).

In answering these questions, I first turn to a close study of Shakesville, whose expansion from a personal to community blog generated ample discussion on the topic of the blog as a safe space.[35] I then elaborate the means by which online feminist safe spaces are built.

Shakesville, an Introduction

Shakesville is an award-winning, well-trafficked community blog, with average daily visits numbering above 12,000.[36] While its readership is mostly comprised of North Americans, Western Europeans, and Australians, the site is visited from people around the world.[37] Founded in 2004 by Melissa McEwan, a white, U.S. American, college-educated woman, Shakesville was originally McEwan's personal blog and named "Shakespeare's Sister." The blog took on new dimensions and ultimately a new name as, McEwan explains, "an entire community of contributors, guest writers, commenters, and lurkers grew."[38] McEwan now runs Shakesville as a full-time job, supported by donations and paid subscriptions.

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[35] While it is typical for feminist blogs that evolve from personal to community blogs (or otherwise have traffic increase or change) to experience conflict over what sort of space the changing site would offer, and what that would mean for participants, Shakesville had a particularly fraught transition, which made it a fertile ground for discussion of "safe spaces." One indication of this is the creation of "anti-fan" sites from former regular commenters and one contributor, including *Drink the Shaker Koolaid* (http://shakesvillekoolaid.tumblr.com/about); *Shakesfail* (http://shakesville.tumblr.com/); and an entry in the *Fail Fandom Wiki* (http://failfandomanonwiki.pbworks.com/w/page/58432745/Shakesville). This fraught expansion owed, in part, to the make-up of Shakesville's early audience, a good portion of which seems to have identified with "progressive," but was more dubious of the "feminist" moniker.

[36] Sitemeter, http://www.sitemeter.com/?a=stats&s=sm5lissie (accessed March 14, 2012). More recently, McEwan reports over 18,000 page-views (Melissa McEwan, "Fundraiser to Keep Shakesville Going," *Shakesville*, December 3, 2015, http://www.shakesville.com/2015/12/fundraiser-to-keep-shakesville-going.html, (accessed December 19, 2015).

[37] Sitemeter.

[38] Melissa McEwan, "Shaxicon," *Shakesville,* January 1, 2010, http://www.shakesville.com/2010/01/shaxicon.html (accessed December 17, 2015).

Daily posts during the week, fall mostly into one of two categories. In the first, one finds news-type posts offering critical coverage of mostly U.S. American politics and popular culture. When applicable, these posts include or are responded to with details of how one might get involved by donating, calling an elected official, and otherwise acting to effect change, reflecting support for a broad range of movements for social justice. "Traditional" feminist issues, such as combatting efforts to defund Planned Parenthood, receive a great deal of coverage;[39] but Shakesville contributors frequently ally themselves (though not uncritically) with broader left coalitions, including the Occupy movement,[40] as well as narrower coalitions, such as Blogging Against Disablism.[41]

The second category of posts—what I have termed "community building and support" posts—primarily consist of "open threads," meaning that they have no set matter for discussion. These "open threads" are loosely organized under a variety of themes such as "nostalgic" music videos from the 1980s and early 1990s, the "daily dose of cute" photo series primarily consisting of photos of pets, and a Friday night "virtual pub."

A less common category of "meta" posts address the nature of the space the blog affords. Here, repeated returns to the ideal of the blog as a "safe" or "safer" space figure prominently and typically elicit more comments than Shakesville's usual fair, including a

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[39] See, for example: Maya Dusenbery, "Attacks on Planned Parenthood are attacks on American Women, "*Feministing*, February 16, 2011, http://feministing.com/2011/02/16/attacks-on-planned-parenthood-are-attacks-on-american-women/ (accessed December 17, 2015); Irin Carmon, "House Votes to Defund Planned Parenthood," *Jezebel*, February 18, 2011, http://jezebel.com/#!5764467/house-votes-to-defund-planned-parenthood (accessed December 17, 2015); and Misty, "Chip, chip, chip…," *Shakesville*, January 31, 2011, http://www.shakesville.com/2011/01/chip-chip-chip.html (accessed December 17, 2015).

[40] Melissa McEwan, "Occupy Everywhere & Economic News Round-Up," November 1, 2011, http://www.shakesville.com/2011/11/occupy-everywhere-economic-news-round.html (accessed December 17, 2015).

[41] Melissa McEwan, "BADD: Out of My Closet," May 1, 2009, http://www.shakesville.com/2009/05/badd-out-of-my-closet.html (accessed December 17, 2015).

surprising number of contributions from "lurkers," that is individuals who read but do not contribute to the blog.[42] The following section takes up "On Safe Spaces and High Hoping Fools," a 2009 post that continues to be linked to regularly, and is described in the comment policy as one of five "important pieces to read to understand the culture and expectations" at Shakesville.[43]

Idealizing Safety

"On Safe Spaces and High Hoping Fools" is an unabashed defense of Shakesville figured as a safe space. McEwan opens by asserting that "[t]here are no totally safe spaces" and describing her own experience of having been raped in a space presumed safe: her childhood home. However, McEwan continues, "[d]espite that, and *because of that*, I've tried to make Shakesville as safe a space as is possible, for everyone who inhabits it" (author's emphasis).[44] In other words, safe space is an ideal held dear, in part, because McEwan's experience of its failure. McEwan continues: "There is no whole, perfect freedom, either, but no one fights for freedom*ish*. The objective serves as inspiration to get as close as we can."[45]

McEwan goes on to elaborate what figuring the blog as a safe space means over several paragraphs, the first of which espouses a view seemingly compatible with the liberal bourgeois ideal, [46] wherein "particulars of the body" do not affect access or the

[42] It is typical for lurkers to announce a change in this practice by, for example, prefacing a comment with "De-lurking to say…" or <de-lurks>.
[43] Melissa McEwan, "Commenting Policy," *Shakesville*, January 1, 2010, http://www.shakesville.com/2010/01/commenting-policy.html (accessed November 13, 2014).
[44] McEwan, "On Safe Spaces and High-Hoping Fools."
[45] McEwan, "On Safe Spaces and High-Hoping Fools."
[46] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 58-61.

ways in which one's words and actions are evaluated.[47] However in situating this ideal as part of what a safe space aspires to, McEwan challenges the notion that such an ideal could be realized in a space that did not actively work to "ensure that the voice and experiences of a disabled trans lesbian of color are as valued as the voice and experiences of a straight, cisgender, able-bodied, white male."[48]

McEwan rejects the assertion that a safe space precludes disagreement, but insists it does require agreement on a range of practices developed to "dismantl[e]" the "disincentives and barriers to participation in other spaces."[49] These disincentives and barriers include the use of "slurs," "silencing strategies (e.g., accusations of hysteria or hypersensitivity or humorlessness)" and "the perpetuation of violence, and revisit[ing of] violence upon its survivors, by directing its [violence's] language and images at others."[50] McEwan similarly rejects the notion that a safe space amounts to a promise of comfort or "polite" speech, writing a "safe space doesn't guarantee freedom from criticism, or from mockery of one's (moribund) ideas or (disgraceful) behavior."[51]

Finally, speaking of her own experience, McEwan suggests the blog as a safe space is a site of collective learning, or perhaps more aptly unlearning:

> I am a better person than I once was because people gave me the gift of expecting more of me, of setting a higher standard and encouraging me to reach for it, of challenging me not to settle into the well-tread grooves of my socialization, of admonishing me to reject the vast and varied prejudices and myths with which I'd been indoctrinated . . .

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[47] McEwan, "On Safe Spaces and High-Hoping Fools."
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

Several commentators pick up on the theme of (un)learning around privilege and even the tendency to dismiss the inadequacies of online discourse as irrelevant or, as MollyH writes, "eye rolls and 'pfft, it's the internet people!'"[52]

Throughout, McEwan uses language that deliberately muddles the common distinctions between "being" and "harm" in on- versus offline contexts. Participants "inhabi[t]" and "congregate" in the space the blog affords. And, as noted above, violence has a "language and images" which McEwan figures as both perpetuating worldly phenomena of "war, and torture, and sexual assault" and adversely impacting survivors of these and other forms of violence. Taken together, McEwan uses the language of "safe space" to figure reading and speaking online as embodied practices unfolding under conditions of durable structural violence and inequality that has differentially shaped those who come to blog.

Constructing "Safe Spaces" Online

Insofar as these blogs deliver on the promise of a "safe" or "safer" space, it is by materializing the ideal through their practices and manipulations of the built design of the site. Althusser's concept of ideology is helpful in making sense of what I mean here by "materialization." Althusser characterizes ideology as "*material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.*"[53] In other words, "ideology" names the process through which beliefs about the world are given material form. Analyzing online

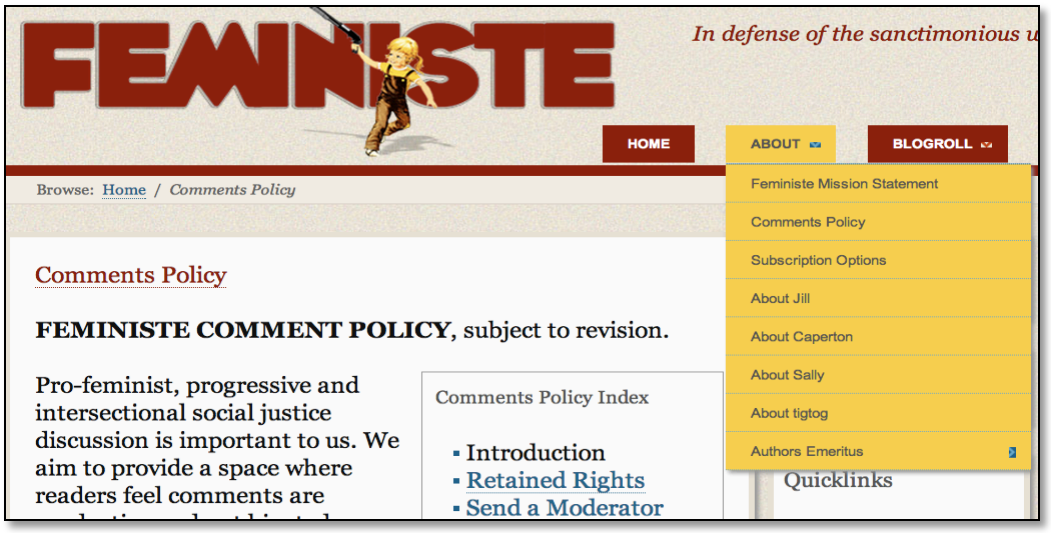
[52] MollyH, comment on McEwan, "On Safe Spaces and High-Hoping Fools."
[53] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, quoted in Elizabeth Wingrove, "Interpellating Sex," *Signs* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1999), 876 (emphasis Althusser's).

feminist safe spaces through this lens one finds not only words about safety and differentially situated bodies, but tools and practices of regulation, of both the self and others.

Everything in Moderation

The moderation tools that feminists took years to develop on Usenet in the 1980s and early 1990s are now a common feature of computer-mediated communication platforms like blogs, and labor-intensive moderation practices are a mainstay of online feminist safe spaces. Moderators approve or review all comments; delete, edit, or otherwise address problematic comments; and ban repeat offenders.[54] These moderation practices and expectations for commenters are typically detailed in commenting policies, which figure prominently on the sites (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: Screenshot from the feminist blog, Feministe, illustrating the prominent placement of a comment policy[55]



[54] s. e. smith, "Curating Safe(r) Spaces in Comments," *Tiger Beatdown*, December 19, 2011, http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/12/19/4277/ (accessed December 17, 2015).
[55] *Feministe*, http://www.feministe.us/blog/ (Screenshot from March 11, 2014).

Some aspects of these comments policies are unsurprising. For example, they consistently refuse to publish comments that traffic in hate speech, threats of violence, and bigotry. What is included in these categories can vary and, at many blogs, has changed over time, typically in response to readers. More surprising, perhaps, is the not uncommon refusal to publish comments from a "devil's advocate" and rejection of the idea that all points of view are valuable, espoused by s. e. smith of Tiger Beatdown:

> I often decline to publish comments... because they don't add to a conversation in a meaningful way and bring the focus of the conversation back on to people with privilege... I *especially* am not interested in entertaining 'devil's advocate' arguments, because I find them deeply offensive and they seem to be a favourite little trick among some privileged commenters on the Internet.[56]

Similarly, McEwan writes "we don't do flamewars with people who treat discussion of progressive feminist ideals as an abstract academic exercise or want to play 'devil's advocate.'"[57] Finally, a refusal to "do newbie education on demand," that is, to explain feminist concepts and critiques to those unfamiliar with them is also common.[58]

Mockery is also used as a means of shaping exchanges on the site. For example, at Feministe, rather than delete a comment, moderators will "fluffinate" it, leaving a parody of the original accompanied by a picture of a "Disapproving Giraffe" (see Figure 4).[59]

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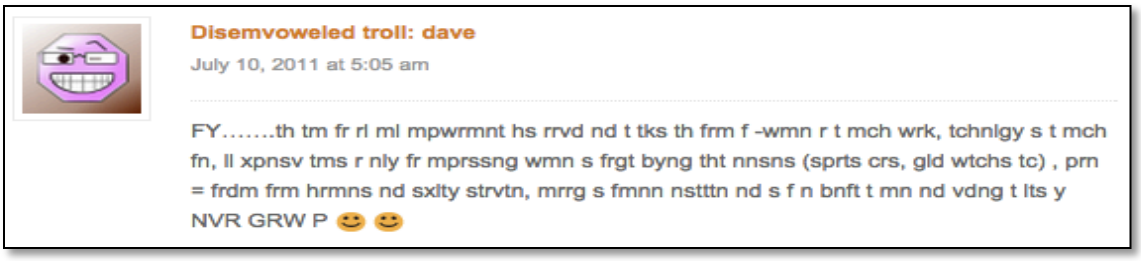
[56] s. e. smith, "Curating Safe(r) Spaces in Comments."
[57] Melissa McEwan, "Commenting Policy."
[58] Ibid.
[59] Tigtog, "Moderation Note: Do You See a Need for a Giraffe?" *Feministe*, February 7, 2013 (updated February 2013 and March 20, 2013), http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2013/02/07/moderation-note-do-you-see-a-need-for-a-giraffe/ (accessed December 17, 2015).

FIGURE 4: Screenshot of a "fluffinated" comment at Feministe.[60]

Other sites would "disemvowel" problematic comments or remove all the vowels resulting in a string of words that look like nonsense (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Screenshot of a "disemvoweled" comment at Finally, a Feminism 101 Blog.[61]



Finally, there is a communal aspect to moderation. At minimum, all participants are required to familiarize themselves with comment policies and shape their comments accordingly. Many sites indicate an expectation that participants educate themselves as

[60] Jill, "Standing with Adria," *Feministe*, March 21, 2013, http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2013/03/21/standing-with-adria (accessed December 17, 2015).
[61] Disemvoweled troll: dave, July 10, 2011 (5:05a.m.), comment on tigtog, "FAQ: What Do Feminists Want?" *Finally, a Feminism 101 Blog*, March 13, 2007, http://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com/2007/03/13/faq-what-do-feminists-want (accessed December 17, 2015). "Disemvoweled troll: dave" is also an edit; the user had indicated his name was "dave." His comment likely read as follows before being "disemvoweled": "FYI…….the time for real male empowerment has arrived and it takes the form of –women are too much work, technology is too much fun, all expensive items are only for impressing women so forget buying that nonsense (sports cars, gold watch etc), porn = freedom from hormones and sexuality starvation, marriage is feminine institution and is of no benefit to men and evading it lets you NEVER GROW UP…

regards their own privilege and, at sites like Angry Black Woman and Shakesville, likely well beyond it via "required reading."[62] While there is no way to enforce that commenters undertake this reading before commenting, comments that clearly reflect a failure to do so are likely to face criticism and even mockery from moderators and other commenters. Readers may also be asked to actively share in shaping the space by calling other participants (commenters or contributors) on potentially problematic posts.[63] For example, commenters at Feministe are asked to submit a comment including "We need a giraffe here" to alert moderators of a post they believe does not fit with community standards.[64]

Trigger Warnings and Content Notes

In addition to moderation practices, "trigger warnings" are a common feature of online safe spaces. Trigger warnings are notifications of general categories of content or imagery that could elicit a harmful, psychosomatic response in individuals who have experienced trauma. As many have noted, individual "triggers" can be deeply personalized, including the cologne of a sexual assailant or, for a war veteran, the heavy-machinery sound that accompanies garbage collection.[65] Trigger warnings do not aspire

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[62] "Required Reading," *The Angry Black Woman*, http://theangryblackwoman.com/required-reading/, (accessed July 23, 2015); McEwan, "Commenting Policy."
[63] See, for example, Arkades et al., "'All In' Means All of Us," *Shakesville*, 9 June 2009, http://www.shakesville.com/2009/06/posted-by-arkades-deeky-erica-c.html (accessed December 17, 2015).
[64] Tigtog, "Moderation Note: Do You See a Need for a Giraffe?"
[65] Roxane Gay, "The Illusion of Safety/The Safety of Illusion," *The Rumpus*, August 28, 2012, http://therumpus.net/2012/08/the-illusion-of-safetythe-safety-of-illusion/; Jennifer Karady, "*Soldiers' Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan*," Photographs and Sound Installation, September 25, 2014 – November 12, 2014, Institute for the Humanities, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. See also: Gay, *Bad Feminist*.

to account for all triggers, but rely on general categories, such as "sexual assault," "transphobia," or "police violence."

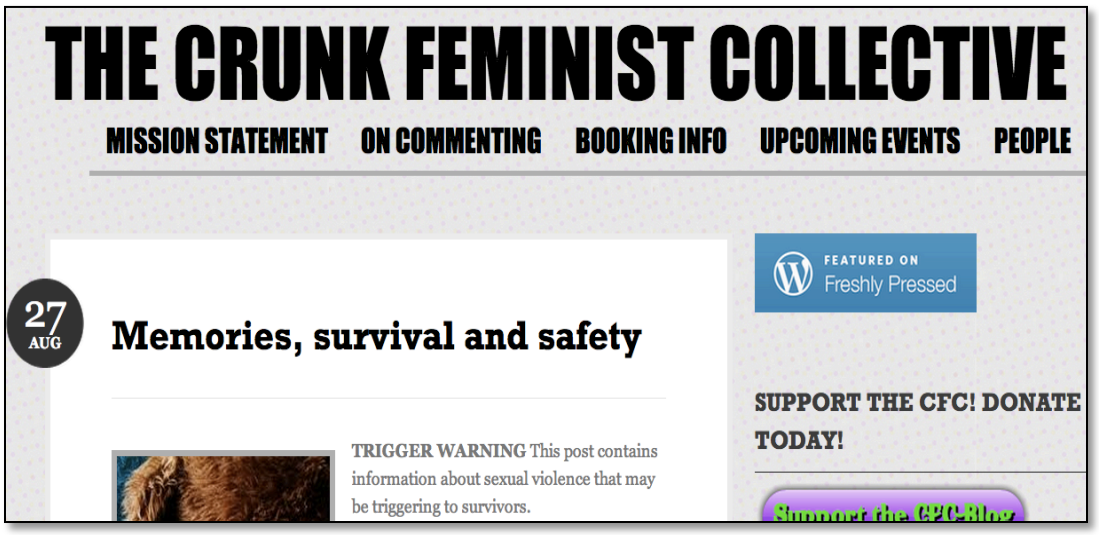
Contrary to what much recent mainstream coverage suggests (taken up in Chapter Four), feminist bloggers and contributors indicate trigger warnings are not primarily intended as a way of avoiding material. Although that is a possible outcome, they are intended to give readers information that can better prepare them for content that may "trigger" psychosomatic symptoms, including heightened anxiety, flashbacks, and fainting. So, for example, Shakesville's McEwan explains that trigger warnings afford readers "the option to assess whether they're in a state of mind to deal with triggering material before they stumble across it."[66] Others mention that where they read a potentially triggering piece is of import.

Using a trigger warning means writing "Trigger Warning," "Trigger," "TW," or "Warning" followed by an explanation of what content may be triggering (see Figure 6 below). These warnings typically appear in the title or at the top of a post—often in bold and placed in brackets, or between asterisks—or alongside linked content within a post that contains triggering material.

Comment policies often include a request for commenters to consider whether the use of a trigger warning is necessary before posting, and indicate that commenters are expected to be responsive to another commenter (or moderator) indicating that have been "triggered" by something that was said and not continue in that vein without the use of a trigger warning. The use of trigger warnings by commentators may also be enforced or modeled by a moderator who edits a comment to add a trigger warning.

[66] Melissa McEwan, "I Write Letters," *Shakesville*, April 13, 2010, http://www.shakesville.com/2010/04/i-write-letters_13.html (accessed December 17, 2015).

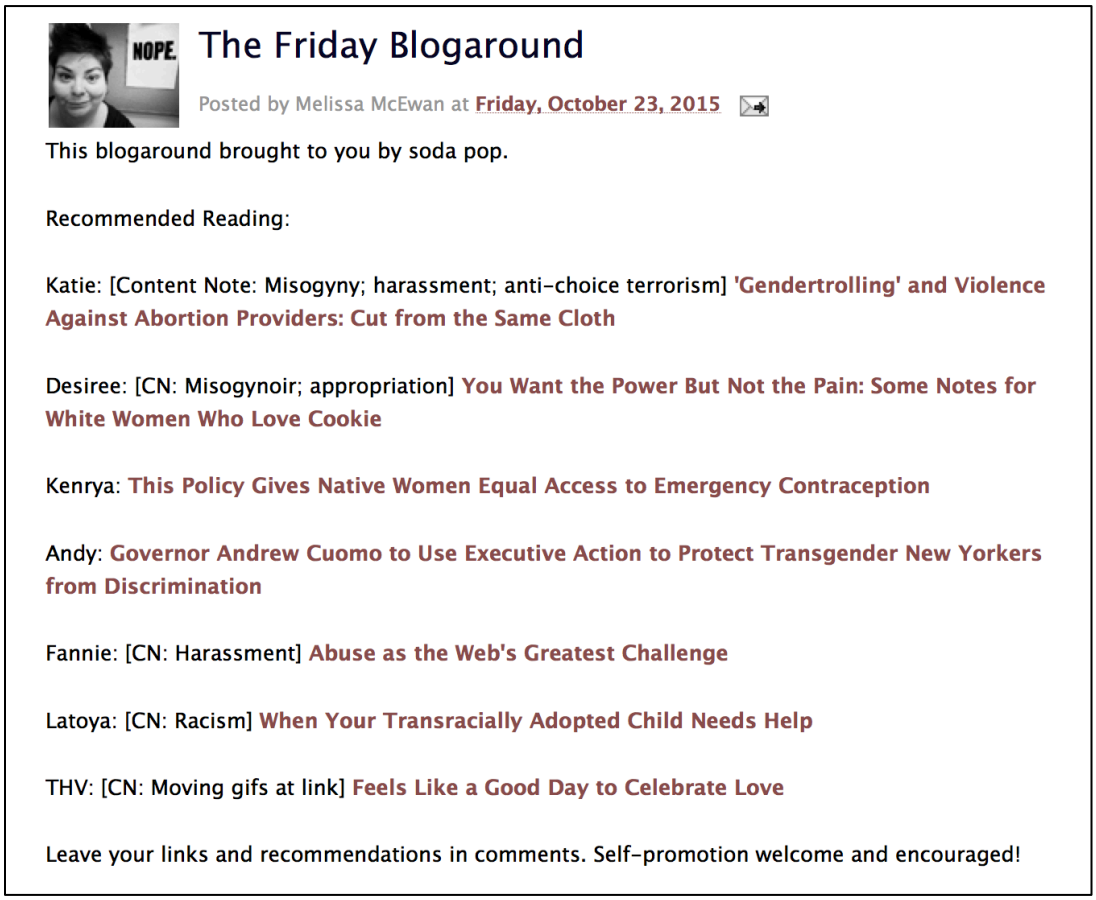
FIGURE 6: Screenshot of a "trigger warning" at the feminist blog, Crunk Feminist Collective.[67]



Many sites, including Shakesville, have opted to replace the language of trigger warnings with that of "Content Notes/CN" or "Content Warnings/CW" (see Figure 7). This change seems to have been motivated by several things. First, some writers seem to have failed to indicate the nature of potentially triggering material, perhaps reflecting some confusion about who the trigger warning is "for" (conveying something of the author's state of mind versus conveying information to audience).[68] Using the less ubiquitous term "content" was thought to prompt the writer to indicate what sort of content might be triggering.

[67] Crunkista, "Memories, Survival and Safety," *Crunk Feminist Collective*, August, 27 2012, http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2012/08/27/memories-survival-and-safety/.
[68] This was the case with Bodies Under Siege (BUS), which has been credited as one of the first sites to use trigger warnings. BUS is a Web board founded in 1996 dedicated to recovery-oriented discussion of self-harm, but which expanded to include forums for discussion of sexual assault and eating disorders. BUS switched to content warnings in the early 2000s. I take up the history of trigger warning's "migrations" in Chapter Four.

Figure 7: Screenshot of "content notes" at the feminist blog, Shakesville[69]



Another explanation for the move from "trigger warning" to "content note" or "content warning" is that feminist bloggers sought a way to respond to feedback, especially from those who experienced psychosomatic triggers, expressing frustration with the use of "trigger warning" given the impossibility of identifying and flagging all triggers. In other words, they felt it was a promise that could not be fulfilled. Finally, content warnings or notes can be read as an effort to flag content associated not only

[69] Melissa McEwan, "The Friday Blogaround," *Shakesville*, October 23, 2015, http://www.shakesville.com/2015/10/the-friday-blogaround_23.html.

with individual trauma but in addition with what disability scholar Melanie Yergeau terms "collective traumas, including, but not limited to, racism, heterocentrism, and ableism."[70]

Safe For? Safe From?

In one sense we could say online feminist safe spaces strive to be "safe for" feminist counter-public speech, that is, for public address that anticipates and cultivates an audience that is feminist. As Frances Shaw notes in her study of Australian feminist bloggers, without these "safe spaces," anti-feminist speech would dominate.[71] And indeed we saw this in Chapter Two as feminists struggled to create a Usenet newsgroup in which they could address matters of common (feminist) concern.

Many of the challenges faced by Usenet feminists persist even as the affordances of computer-mediated communication have changed. The moderation tools that took years for Usenet feminists to develop are now a mainstay of blogging platforms and, as discussed above, are central to constructing online safe spaces. Yet feminist bloggers remain hemmed in by adherents of both the dominant, libertarian discursive norms of CMC and the normative, liberal ideal.

Running these sites requires a level of expertise with common trolling practices aimed at disrupting or derailing conversations. This expertise includes knowledge of

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[70] Melanie Yergeau, "Disable All the Things: On Affect, Metadata, & Audience," (keynote address, Computers and Writing 2014 conference, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, June 6, 2104), https://vimeo.com/97721996.

[71] Frances Shaw, "Still 'Searching for Safety Online': collective strategies and discursive resistance to trolling and harassment in a feminist network," *The Fibreculture Journal* 22 (2013), http://twentytwo.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-157-still-searching-for-safety-online-collective-strategies-and-discursive-resistance-to-trolling-and-harassment-in-a-feminist-network/.

rhetorical practices common to trolls,[72] silencing strategies as well as technical know-how (for example being able to identify "sockpuppeting," which is the practice of using a different handle or pseudonym to continue posting after one has been banned or to create the appearance that others agree with you). At times it requires a tech-savvy team to get the site back up and running after massive, coordinated spamming, hacking, or Denial-of-Service attacks.[73]

Constructing these safe spaces is a laborious and time-consuming commitment. There is every indication that it is often an emotionally draining and sometimes fearful one. In describing the costs of running Shakesville as a "safe space" for public feminist discourse, McEwan writes: "I get disturbing email. People have come to the door… my sense of security is no longer what it was. That's not a small thing for a survivor of sexual assault with post-traumatic stress disorder."[74] In a similar thread, Tiger Beatdown's s. e. smith writes:

> People have sent me my social security number, information about my family members, identifying details that make it very clear they know exactly how to find me. They have politely provided details of exactly what they'd like to do to me and my family, they send me creepy things in the mail...[75]

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[72] Interestingly, it seems that part of what makes trolls identifiable is the troll's desire to be identified by other trolls who may be viewing or participating in the same comments thread. See: Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*.
[73] Melissa McEwan, "On Labors of Love, Hope, Growing Pains, Gratitude, and Teaspoons," *Shakesville*, November 17, 2008, http://www.shakesville.com/2008/11/on-labors-of-love-hope-growing-pains.html; Melissa McEwan, "Still," *Shakesville*, May 21, 2010, http://www.shakesville.com/2010/05/still.html; s. e. smith, "On Blogging, Threats, and Silence," *Tiger Beatdown*, October 11, 2011, http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/11/on-blogging-threats-and-silence/.
[74] McEwan, "On Labors of Love, Hope, Growing Pains, Gratitude, and Teaspoons."
[75] s. e. smith, "On Blogging, Threats, and Silence."

Flavia Dzodan, also of Tiger Beatdown, sheds some light on "disturbing" and "creepy" messages feminist women bloggers,[76] receive:

> Let me tell you this: you are going to be called a cunt. Or, like I was, you are going to be invited to kill yourself because you are a waste of humanity. You are going to be threatened with rape. Your photos, if you happen to be a public figure, are going to be distributed as further proof of your ugliness and in a baffling case of transitive relation, this supposed ugliness is going to be used as proof that your opinion is invalid... If you are a minority (i.e. not White), your ethnicity will be generalized and used as a stereotype to qualify your opinion. And you will always be a slut and a bitch. Because online, we are all hypersexualized bitches who should just know their places and shut up.[77]

Contributors at most of these feminist sites have taken breaks from blogging, they have seriously considered shutting their blogs down, and many write of feminist bloggers who did shut down their sites or withdrew behind a password.

IV. Constituting and Contesting Authoritative Public Speech Online

Situating feminist blogging practices in the context of theorizing on publics and counter-publics entails attending to the social imaginaries they shape, that is, to how they shape participants' understanding of the world and themselves in it, and of legitimate or authoritative public discourse. In doing so I hope to illustrate that the feminist

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[76] There's a lot of evidence to suggest that women bloggers, even those who are not (openly) feminist, receive these sorts of comments routinely. See for example: See for example: Helen Lewis Hasteley, "'You Should Have Your Tongue Ripped Out': The Reality of Sexist Abuse Online," November 3, 2011, http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/helen-lewis-hasteley/2011/11/comments-rape-abuse-women; Vanessa Thorpe and Richard Rogers, "Women Bloggers Call for a Stop to 'Hateful' Trolling by Misogynist Men," *The Observer*, November 5, 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/05/women-bloggers-hateful-trolling?CMP=twt_gu; and Helen Lewis Hasteley, "On Rape Threats and Internet Trolls, *New Statesman*, November 6, 2011, http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/helen-lewis-hasteley/2011/11/rape-threats-abuse-sex-female.

[77] Flavia Dzodan, "Politics and Gender Imbalance Online: Women Are Not Participating," *Tiger Beatdown*, September 5, 2011, http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/09/05/politics-and-gender-imbalance-online-women-are-not-participating/.

blogosphere is engaged in a politics understood as a world-making practice that always also arises from the contestation over, or construction of, legitimate authority.

To begin with, it's worth briefly noting how odd these digital feminists' "safe spaces" look when contrasted with the liberal ideal of public discourse. Mockery, censure, and banning appear strangely punitive when contrasted with existing ideals of democratic discourse where, to quote public sphere theorist Jürgen Habermas, "the unforced force of the better argument" wins the day. To be sure, Habermas's account of the bourgeois public sphere has been roundly critiqued for failing to sufficiently attend to differences in power and access, and otherwise problematically idealizing a moment of public discourse.[78] And, we might add, that the conditions feminist bloggers are operating in are far from ideal. But while we could—and many have—admitted moderation as a reasonable response to non-ideal conditions, mockery and other forms of disparaging discourse, the refusal to "do newbie education on demand" (itself a rather disparaging framing of those unfamiliar with feminist thought), as well as disallowing devil's advocates to have their say, may seem out of hand.[79]

Iris Marion Young's discussion of public speech in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* gives us a foothold to begin making sense of these practices. Young argues that the ideal of the civic public "as impartial and universal," detached from any one's particular lived experience has been a powerful tool for creating hierarchies of valued public speech. As Young explains:

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[78] Goodman, *Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Calhoun*, Habermas and the Public Sphere; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
[79] McEwan, "Commenting Policy."

> By assuming that reason stands opposed to desire, affectivity, and the body, this conception of the civic public excludes bodily and affective aspects of human existence. In practice this assumption forces homogeneity upon the civic public, excluding from the public those individuals and groups that do not fit the model of the rational citizen capable of transcending body and sentiment. This exclusion has a twofold bias: the tendency to oppose reason and desire, and the association of these traits with kinds of persons.[80]

It is this opposition between reason and affect, desire and the body, that has resulted in tropes such as the "hysterical woman" and "angry Black woman," in addition to diverse other means of excluding, marginalizing, and disciplining women and others.

Historically, these exclusions took place at the level of discursive consciousness, a term Young borrows from Anthony Giddens to refer to "those aspects of action and situation which are either verbalized, founded on explicit verbal formula, or easily verbalized" (think: "women are incapable of rational thought").[81] In contemporary liberal societies committed to formal equality, Young argues, these exclusions increasingly play out at what Giddens terms the levels of practical consciousness and the basic security system. The former refers to "habitual, routinized background awareness" (think: assumptions about the relationships between poverty and laziness or criminality) and the latter to a "basic level of identity security and sense of autonomy" (think: an "instinctive" reaction of "that's unfair" to the mention of affirmative action).[82]

The result is a subtler, often unconscious form of exclusion enacted through aversion, avoidance, and unintentionally condescending behavior. At the same time,

> the dominant social etiquette often finds it indecorous and tactless to point out racial, sexual, age or ablist difference in public... The discomfort and anger of the oppressed at this behavior of others towards them therefore remain unspoken if

[80] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 109.
[81] Ibid., 131.
[82] Ibid.

> they expect to be included in those public contexts, and not disturb the routines by calling attention to forms of interaction. [83]

When someone does speak up, Young continues, they are often "accused of being picky, overreacting, making something out of nothing, or of completely misperceiving the situation." In other words, they are "met with denial[s] and powerful gestures of silencing" which can leave them "feel[ing] slightly crazy" and disinclined to speak out in the future.[84]

Young's analysis provides insight into typical responses to the marginalizing discourse that feminist bloggers receive (and draw attention to) through their practice of creating safe spaces. Consider the fact that it is widely accepted in the U.S. that bigoted language, hate speech, and rape threats are just a part of Internet discourse. Not a *desirable* part, of course, but a part nonetheless. The general sense is that, while it's not a part that any reasonable person *likes* or *approves of*, there is nothing to be done about it short of state censorship, which next to no one supports, including feminist bloggers.[85] Finally, this marginalizing discourse is frequently represented as the byproduct of a "vocal minority"[86] or of Internet trolls just looking to get a rise and thus often framed as "unreal."

Taken together these characterizations of marginalizing discourse on the Web work to re-establish the ideal of public speech as impartial, civil, unaffected, and

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[83] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 134.
[84] Ibid.
[85] One feminist blogger has appealed to a website (Reddit), that has served as a venue for sharing "soft-core" pornographic images of children and non-consensual pornographic images of women, to discipline writing and sharing practices within their communities so as to prevent state intervention. See: Zeynep Tufekci, "Free Speech and Power: From Reddit Creeps to anti-Muslim Videos, It's Not *Just* 'Free Speech,'" *Technosociology*, October 14, 2012, http://technosociology.org/?p=1135.
[86] Melissa McEwan, "So Here's What Happened," *Shakesville*, March 20, 2013http://www.shakesville.com/2013/03/so-heres-what-happened.html.

disembodied, in contrast to both the uncivil, aggressive prose of an angry few and those who would make a mountain out of the molehill that is marginalizing discourse by framing it as harmful. The effect is two-fold and somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, it appears that marginalizing discourse is not a "real" bar to discourse on the Web and that taking it as such is indicative of overreaction or hypersensitivity, both signs of illegitimate public speech.[87] On the other hand, in granting the pervasive presence of non-ideal interlocutors, marginalizing discourse on the Web can be used to devalue online public speech and reinforce mainstream media outlets (including their online manifestations) as authoritative spaces for "the public's" appearance.[88]

The Telegraph's Brendan O'Neill's response to a coordinated effort by women bloggers in November 2011 to raise awareness about the misogyny women bloggers and commenters disproportionately face online offers an example:

> ...the most striking thing about these fragile feminists' campaign is the way it elides very different forms of speech. So the Guardian report lumps together "threats of rape", which are of course serious, with "crude insults" and "unstinting ridicule", which are not that serious. If I had a penny for every time I was crudely insulted on the internet, labelled a prick, a toad, a shit, a moron, a wide-eyed member of a crazy communist cult, I'd be relatively well-off. For better or worse, crudeness is part of the internet experience, and if you don't like it you can always read The Lady instead...
>
> Of course it is true that the standard of discussion on the internet leaves a lot to be desired. There is a remarkable amount of incivility and abusiveness on the web. But that is no excuse for attempting to turn the internet into the online equivalent of a Women's Institute meeting, where no one ever raises their voice or "unstintingly ridicules" another or is crude. I would rather surf a web that caters for all, from the clever to the cranky, rather than put up with an internet

[87] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
[88] Miia Kosonen and Hanna-Kaisa Ellonen, "From Ivory Towers to Online Bazaars? The Internet, Social Media and Competing Discourses in the Newspaper Industry," *Knowledge Management Research & Practice* 8.2 (June 2010), 135-145.

> designed according to the needs of a tiny number of peculiarly sensitive female bloggers.[89]

O'Neill both normalizes marginalizing discourse ("crudeness is part of the internet experience") and distances himself and an unspecified but performed ideal of public discourse ("the standard of discussion on the internet leaves a lot to be desired") from it. He presents himself as evidence that one can be unaffected by "crude ridicule," which has been divested of the misogyny that began the campaign ("If I had a penny for every time I was crudely insulted on the internet… I'd be relatively well-off").

The array of responses to marginalizing discourse that the campaign attempted to highlight—its effects, for example, on the emotional and mental wellbeing of women bloggers and on their ability or willingness to address a public—is collapsed into a matter of preferences ("if you don't like it…"). The fact that the campaign foregrounded marginalizing language directed at authors rather than readers disappears as well ("… you can always read The Lady instead"). O'Neill concludes by affirming that the Internet is already an equally accessible platform (it "caters for all") and that the "tiny number" who think otherwise are simply "peculiarly sensitive" (note that rape threats—the one thing O'Neill admitted as serious—disappear after the first mention).

In short, O'Neill presents two options: deal with it (that is: be like me, experience and engage the Web as I do) or get off the Web. I argue that Shakesville, Tiger Beatdown, and more broadly the feminist blogosphere choose or rather construct a third

[89] Brendan O'Neill, "The Campaign to 'Stamp Out Misogyny Online' Echoes Victorian Efforts to Protect Women from Coarse Language," *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2011, http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/brendanoneill2/100115868/the-campaign-to-stamp-out-misogyny-online-echoes-victorian-efforts-to-protect-women-from-coarse-language/.

possibility captured by McEwan's impolite and aggressively referential prose: "I'll be over here carving out my own space, in the shape of a fat cunt"[90]

V. The Feminist Blogosphere as a Counter-public

In "carving out" these safe spaces on the web, feminist bloggers constitute themselves as a counter-public, that is, is a "[space] of circulation in which it is hoped that the poiesis of scene-making [or world-constituting power of publics] will be transformative, not replicative merely."[91] They offer a different social imaginary, one in which arguments detached from particular, embodied persons and an account of power (recall the Habermasian ideal where "the unforced force of the better argument" wins out) are figured as absurd. Consider the following response to O'Neill's article from Sady Doyle, founder of the feminist blog Tiger Beatdown:

> Ladies! A man has come, to tell you what you can take seriously! Aren't you relieved?
>
> Anyway. Aside from the blatant self-contradiction—feminists are fragile and delicate and weak, so weak they are going to TAKE OVER THE WORLD and RULE IT WITH AN IRON FIST—this is actually just, um, stupid. The threats and the name-calling aren't all that terrifically different. Sure, one kind of speech is actionable, and the other isn't. One kind of speech can require action—if it's credible—and the other just requires a use of the "delete" or "block" button. But it's all meant to accomplish the same thing: Making you shut up...
>
> when you [speak of these things], they call you a whiny little girl who can't handle the Internet. Because, of COURSE multiple chainsaw-rape comments aren't a big deal! They're just words! Sticks and stones! Suck it up, you big Orwellian diaper baby!

[90] McEwan, "So Here's What Happened.". I should note that "fat cunt" is one of the most common "responses" McEwan receives because she is a visibly fat woman.
[91] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 122.

> To you, my friends, I say: Fuck that noise. All of this matters. A hostile work environment matters. Being afraid of your own in-box matters. Deleting your blog because that's the only way for you to have a normal, non-hate-filled life matters. 'Accepting' that continual, virulent, hateful misogynist abuse is a pre-condition for being a lady who talks about thing, or for challenging sexism in any way, no matter who you are: That matters.[92]

Doyle's scathing, sarcastic response to O'Neill's argument construes it as nonsensical ("aside from the blatant self-contradiction…") and "stupid," and O'Neill himself as, to use Young's words, having "completely misperceive[ed] the situation." Doyle's sarcasm also indicates that it's "obvious"—and absurd to think otherwise—that marginalizing words harm or powerfully and adversely affect recipients, that this matters, and that its mattering is not a sign of weakness or hypersensitivity. Finally, Doyle's account is also an account of power in which it is "obvious" that sexism exists (consider that "Ladies! A man has come, to tell you what you can take seriously! Aren't you relieved?" needs no explanation to be read as sarcasm).

These contests of words (and the imaginaries they construct) happen at more micro levels, too, as commenters and moderators enforce the ideal of the blog as a safe space. For example, in responding to a post co-authored by several Shakesville contributors titled "'All In' Means All of Us," which reiterated that those commenting on the blog were expected to participate in making the blog a safe space by attending to their own and others' use of triggering or bigoted language and silencing strategies, commenter bluey512 writes:

> [Shakesville is] not an environment conducive to critical thought and debate, which is what I generally am looking for on the internet. Apparently, Shakesville

[92] Sady Doyle, "Why Are You in Such a Bad Mood? #MenCallMeThings Responds!" *Tiger Beatdown*, November 7, 2011, http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/11/07/why-are-you-in-such-a-bad-mood-mencallmethings-responds/.

> is for those who have already decided they agree with Melissa on most everything, are not interested in further critical thought or debate on certain issues, and simply want leadership and like-minded community.[93]

Commenting on Shakesville's post, "'All In' Means All of Us," one individual insists that "the phrase 'safe space' should probably be something like 'non-argumentation zones' rather than impl[ying] that there's something unsafe about people saying mean things about you on the Internet."[94]

In a follow-up comment bluey512 is careful to acknowledge that there are inequalities in the world and people who suffer from them. It seems, however, that these people—figured by bluey512 as a hypothetical Black population, but above all, as not "here," in the space in question—experience something other than "mere" psychical discomfort. Shakesville commenter PizzaDiavola challenges bluey512's depiction, writing:

> I think that in framing this discussion as an abstract, hypothetical discussion, you're forgetting that the specific situation at hand is neither abstract nor hypothetical… By choosing to treat the discussion at hand as if it were about a hypothetical someone hypothetically and unjustly claiming oppression, you're making this discussion about something that it's not, and in my eyes, treading dangerously close to suggesting that Liss was falsely claiming to be oppressed when she specifically said, 'This triggers me.' Please remember that we are talking about a real person and real actions, right now.[95]

bluey512 does not return to the thread to respond.

While bluey512 and dhex's comments are fairly representative of critiques of safe space. It is worth briefly noting another form of critical response: those that are expressly

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[93] bluey512, 10 June 2009 (11:14a.m.), comment on Arkades et al., "'All In' Means All of Us.".
[94] dhex, 11 June 2009 (10:16a.m.), comment on Agi, "From Each According to His Disability," *Who is IOZ?*, June 10, 2009, http://whoisioz.blogspot.com/2009/06/from-each-according-to-his-disability.html?showComment=1244647881638#c8613896574915162l3. The number of threads posted on blogs other than Shakesville to discuss Shakesville's "safe space" is quite surprising.
[95] PizzaDiavola, 10 June 2009 (01:37p.m.), comment on Arkades et al., "'All In' Means All of Us."

bigoted (that is, those that play out at the level of discursive consciousness). An infamous, deliberately unmoderated post in which McEwan critiques the use of rape jokes drew the following comments (this is, incidentally, precisely the type of post that would include a "trigger warning," in this case for sexual violence and threats and fat hatred):

> Please die, PLEASE???????????????????? Fat and Ugly is noway to go through life.
>
> The only tragedy is that a bullet didn't rip through your brainstem after you were used for your one and only purpose in this world. You should consider yourself lucky that some man finds a hideous troll like yourself rape-able.
>
> whats the difference between a rape joke and raping a woman? the rape joke still has intrinsic worth after its been used once.[96]

In general, comments like these are simply not permitted at Shakesville and other safe spaces; individuals who post comments of this nature are banned and their comments removed. It is worth noting, however, that when responded to at all (prior to deletion), posts of this nature are met with general disapprobation, including from commenters like bluey512 and dhex.[97] Indeed, the "reasoned" critical commenter frequently attempts to establish their credibility by distinguishing themselves from others (often figured as a

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[96] YOU FAT UGLY POT BELLIED PICKELED PIG, May 11, 2007 (5:11p.m.), Guy Compton, May 11, 2007 (10:06p.m.), and blew whale April 25, 2011 (5:51a.m.), comments on Melissa McEwan, "Rape Is Hilarious," *Shakesville*, May 11, 2007, http://shakesville.wordpress.com/2007/05/11/rape-is-hilarious/.

[97] For example: "Throughout your writings you make reference to a need to redefine manhood; I wonder if you might explain how or why this might be necessary? You frequently allude to men's boorish behavior toward women—to be sure, the examples you give are just ludicrously offensive. I have nothing but scorn for men who would grab a woman on a train, for example, or whistle at them. I have very rarely seen such behavior, though, and I know a large number of men who would never even consider acting so obnoxiously. I wonder if perhaps you are not projecting a couple of semi-civilized idiots' misogyny onto about half the world." Quoted in Melissa McEwan, "Troll Math and Teaspoons," *Shakesville*, August 18, 2010, http://shakesville.com/2010/08/troll-math-and-teaspoons.html.

small minority and/or as trolls) whose behavior is "really" sexist, racist, ablist, etc., thereby implying that their behavior is not.

The distinction between a clearly bigoted commenter and a commenter like bluey512 is important in that, while the former is not tolerated, most feminist blogs will and do engage the latter, requesting they be attentive to potentially triggering or offensive language, confronting and challenging underlying assumptions, directing them to the commenting policy and "Feminism 101" readings available on the blog, and explaining the reasons behind the commenting policy before taking other action such as banning. Sometimes these replies are taken in stride, met with an apology and a commitment to improve. Often they are met with (at least some initial) resistance, but it is not uncommon to read of a commenter who describes having misstepped when they first began commenting in a safe space like Shakesville.

Embodied Strangers

To understand the political work of feminist safe spaces one must consider them as a feminist counter-public practice and thus as a means of structuring discursive relations between strangers that challenge dominant discursive norms. Feminist blogs like Shakesville can be understood as working to transform public discourse by re-imagining "appropriate" democratic stranger sensibilities, that is, how the other-equal of public address is imagined. Central to this re-imagining is the vulnerable, feeling body whose appearance on the scene of public discourse cultivates interdependence, distributed agency, and relations of care.

Recall the incorporation of content or trigger warnings to provide information to readers who are then better positioned to determine the best way to engage material that could elicit a debilitating psychosomatic or disabled response.[98] Focusing narrowly on those who read for or "use" trigger warnings and clarifying often gross misperceptions regarding the nature of a trigger and the typical function of trigger warnings, leads feminist disability studies scholar Angela Carter to argue for their conceptualization in terms of "access."

This is an important contribution, but if we remain here, we fall short of a counter-public practice. What's more, one could say that dominant modes of CMC publicity are centrally concerned with access tailored to individualized needs or preferences by means of technical fixes. Of course, few technical fixes exist that support disabled individuals' access (applications for epileptics are the only thing I was able to find). Indeed, when mainstream, feminist-allied blog Jezebel was faced with a "barrage" of comments including "rape GIFs," or short, animated depictions of "violent pornography" over several months, it took a public call-out on the part of Jezebel editors for its parent company, Gawker Media, to procure a technical fix.[99] Nonetheless, my point is that one could imagine a technical fix supporting such access, for example, a plug-in that scanned text for keywords or categories input by a user and alerted said user to their presence.

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[98] Angela Carter, "Teaching with Trauma: Trigger Warnings, Feminism, and Disability Pedagogy," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2015); Yergeau, "Disable All the Things: On Affect, Metadata, & Audience,"

[99] Jezebel Staff, "We Have a Rape Gif Problem and Gawker Media Won't Do Anything About It," *Jezebel*, August 11, 2014, http://jezebel.com/we-have-a-rape-gif-problem-and-gawker-media-wont-do-any-1619384265

I'd like to suggest that trigger warnings—incubated in Web boards for discussion of trauma and recovery, adapted by feminist forums, reworked for "crip" blogs centered on (dis)ability, and picked up by queer microblogs—be considered a counter-public practice, that is, as a collective world-building practice. Discussions of trigger warnings that focus narrowly on those who read for them erase the writer who, in voluntarily incorporating them, is also "using" trigger warnings. Such discussions likewise obscure how writers who use trigger warnings offer not only a vision but also a practice of agency as distributed: here, "access" is achieved through the collaboration of writers and readers. Moderation tools and their absence or failures (detailed in Chapter Two) offer another example of the ways in which feminist counter-public practice online contribute to an agency more readily experienced as non-sovereign, embedded in both the human and non-human.[100]

Considering trigger warnings as a counter-public practice requires that one account for their possible effects on both writers and readers, with the latter understood to include not only those who actively read for them but also those who might note them in passing. As Melanie Yergeau has argued, "trigger warnings… anticipate a *disabled* response, at a guttural and embodied/enminded level. And, more than this, they actively *decenter* normative audience expectations."[101] In anticipating "disabled" responses, the writerly practice of including a trigger warnings encourages one to move outside or

[100] While many would agree the experience of an individual as sovereign agent is theoretically unsound or ontologically incoherent, in some ways, the digital revolution offers a more perfect lived, felt experience of this form of agency for many. We see this in Chapter Two, where feminists' articulation of problems within ostensibly feminist newsgroups were met with the insistence that users simply needed to use the various filters correctly to achieve desired outcomes. The excessive speech of the "unconventional woman," Mark Ethan Smith, which spilled out of its appropriate newsgroup into several general newsgroups offered a brief experience to many unfamiliar with it of the ways filters might utterly fail to achieve desired outcomes. More on this in Chapter Four.

[101] Yergeau, "Disable All the Things: On Affect, Metadata, & Audience."

beyond one's own experience of trauma, or lack thereof. Such moves are supported by recommended reading that broadens the scope and content of "common knowledge."

In these ways, trigger warnings cultivate relations of care and obligation between a writer and her public premised on recognition of vulnerability and situated embodiment, or what Judith Butler has termed the "social ontology" of the body. Butler elaborates: "to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form… In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality—including language, work, and desire—that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing."[102] "Caring" under these conditions requires writers to pause and reflect on the possible effects of their words given the persistence of inequality of differentially situated and embodied readers. Indeed, as a writerly practice, the fact that one can anticipate certain things as potentially triggering, such as a graphic account of sexual assault, turns on an understanding of the connection between the events graphically depicted and structural violence and inequality.[103]

This decentering of a normative audience has also affected "normal" readers who do not read for trigger warnings. For example, commenting in response to a mainstream, feminist-allied blog post on the topic of trigger warnings, Jules writes:

> I am in favor of trigger warnings. I am not a survivor of rape or any other typically-triggering experience, but seeing the trigger warning often reminds me that the freedom I have to not be triggered by graphic material is a privilege. It reinforces the pervasive nature of trauma and raises my level of empathy/ consideration for those who have survived sexual assaults /domestic violence, etc.

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[102] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, 3.

[103] As many have noted, any one individual's "triggers" can be deeply personalized, including the cologne of an sexual assailant or, for a war veteran, the sound of garbage collection

> It takes me only a second to read the words 'trigger warning' but the lessons about the nature of PTSD are more lasting, and it reminds me that there are people out there reading the same thing I am reading for whom THIS IS PERSONAL.[104]

More typically, and perhaps especially at first, trigger warnings are met with resistance by "normal" readers.[105] I do not dwell on this reader here, as she is central to the following chapter.[106]

Writing the Body

Aside from practices premised on a vision of strangers addressed as vulnerable and embodied, the vulnerably body is performed through accounts of embodied, affective responses to things read or written. For example, in a post discussing the relationship between a past trauma and present-day fatigue and depression (and, implicitly, the relevance of both these things for public discussion), Tiger Beatdown's Flavia Dzodan writes: "I sit here typing and deleting, typing and deleting, again, another try… I take a breath and I type."[107] CMC adaptations of the theatrical genre, which

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[104] Jules, comment on Amanda Hess, "Trigger Warnings and Being an Asshole," *The Sexist* (*The Washington City Paper* blog), April 16 2010, http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/sexist/2010/04/16/trigger-warnings-and-being-an-asshole/ (accessed December 17, 2015).

[105] I was certainly one of these readers and can speak from personal experience of having been irritated by trigger and content warnings when I began regularly reading feminist blogs. I have come to experience them as specialized, user-created "tags," not unlike the ubiquitous "NSFW," an acronym for "Not Safe for Work" indicating that material that follows or is linked to contains graphic imagery and/or sound that may draw unwanted (especially supervisory) attention in the workplace.

[106] For those unfamiliar, "tags" are a standard aspect of many social media platforms used to organize content, usually appearing at the end of a post. On blogs, tags make posts easier to find and link (literally hyperlink) to others that are likewise tagged. So, for example, a political blogger might tag posts with "Republican primary" or "global warning," as relevant. Interested readers could click on the tag at the end of the post to find other posts offered on the subject.

[107] Flavia Dzodan, "Here I Am. Fatigue, Depression and Infertility," *Tiger Beatdown*, February 27, 2013, http://tigerbeatdown.com/2013/02/27/here-i-am-fatigue-depression-and-sterility/.

indicate what players are doing while speaking, also serve as signposts of the vulnerable, feeling body. So, for example, contributors "*cringe*" and "<seethes>."

I say "she" not because these digital feminist sites are only "populated" by women (it is not uncommon for participants to identify as a cisgendered man, as genderqueer or trans*) but because, as elsewhere, gender does work in making sense of bodies and expectations of their capacities and it is the vulnerable, feeling body that has been figured as a woman.[108] However, in contrast to its historical use,[109] the vulnerable, feeling body is not that of an absolute Other, but is figured as the self or the other-equal of democratic discourse. In short, embodiment that renders one vulnerable and that might elicit strong feelings becomes the norm—it is the expected "condition" of strangers— though the particular form vulnerability may take cannot be known in advance. It is neither synonymous with victimhood nor an indicator of less valued public speech. This embodied public speaker challenges the idealization of the independent speech-actor whose obligation to strangers begins and ends with good intentions, as in the liberal, bourgeois norm, or who has no obligation to strangers addressed, as is the case with those committed to a libertarian model of unregulated public speech.

[108] Joan Scott, "Gender as a Useful Category of Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986); Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*.

[109] For example, it is well documented that this imagined body—figured symbolically as the nation, or the white, colonial woman who was thought to be an irresistible object of desire of colonized men—has been hailed in speech and writing in order to motivate and legitimize the policing and delimiting of proper realms of actions for a whole range of sub-equals: Black Americans, colonized populations, and even the women (white and otherwise) whose imagined bodies served as the grounds for such policing. See: Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*.

Contemptible Speakers

Crucial to the feminist counter-public practice is the appropriation of affective stances associated with dominance via the acceptance, even promotion, of mockery, sarcasm, and other disparaging discourse in the feminist blogosphere. Recall that Young notes the use of aversion and condescension to subtly establish hierarchies of valued speech in contemporary liberal societies. Similarly, Don Herzog's study of public discourse and conservatism in early nineteenth-century England suggests contempt reflects an "an account of high and low" and was used to reinforce but also to upset existing hierarchies.[110] Simply put, "whoever served as an object of contempt could constitute the lower orders and whoever got away with expressing contempt could constitute the upper orders;" the former were marked as illegitimate public speakers, the latter as legitimate, authoritative.[111]

Mockery, contempt, and dismissive sarcasm function similarly in these feminist blogs to delimit legitimate public speakers. Of course these are contested demarcations; recall O'Neill's (shall we say contemptuous?) framing of feminist bloggers as "fragile" and "peculiarly sensitive." Regardless, by mocking, by stating that they're "not offended, [they're] contemptuous,"[112] or that they're "quite comfortable with making privileged people uncomfortable"[113] on their blogs, feminist bloggers adopt affective stances

[110] Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders*, 235.
[111] Ibid, 245.
[112] Melissa McEwan, "Say It with Me Now," *Shakesville*, January 8, 2013, http://www.shakesville.com/2013/01/say-it-with-me-now.html; Melissa McEwan, "Remember…" *Shakesville*, August 26, 2009, http://www.shakesville.com/2009/08/remember.html.
[113] s. e. smith, "Curating Safe(r) Spaces in Comments."

associated with authority and legitimate public speakers.[114] They also invite others—strangers—"to get the joke," to join them in being "contemptuous" rather than offended.[115]

VII. Conclusion, or: Is This Therapy?

I have argued that feminist "safe spaces" on the Web should be understood as part of a practice of counter-publicity that challenges dominant ideals of public speech that effectively silence and exclude marginalized groups, including but not limited to women. Central to this practice (and the motivation for it) is a care and attention to the varied ways in which systemic inequalities are embedded in language, which in turn shapes one's experience of the body and the world. The body which can and has been harmed, and which can and has been made grounds for dismissal, exclusion, silencing, and violence, centers and authorizes feminist bloggers' construction of safe spaces.

Recalling that a rhetoric of "safe spaces" is by no means new to feminist theory or practice, and likewise that it has a troubled history, and the now powerful association between "safe spaces" and comfortable, therapeutic, and otherwise politically unproductive spaces,[116] we must yet ask: Are feminist blogging communities like Shakesville and Tiger Beatdown akin to the "safe spaces" Reagon speaks of? Are

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[114] This may explain, in part, why feminist bloggers routinely receive bigoted, hateful invective; as Herzog puts it: "One is angry at a rough equal, not a patent inferior" (Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders*, 236).

[115] McEwan, "Remember…"

[116] For example, the language and troubling of "safe spaces" are ubiquitous in pedagogical studies. See for example: Kim Hackford-Peer, "In the Name of Safety: Discursive Positionings of Queer Youth," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 6 (November 2010), 541-556; Kyoko Kishimoto and Mumbi Mwangi, "Critiquing the Rhetoric of 'Safety' in Feminist Pedagogy: Women of Color Offering an Account of Ourselves," *Feminist Teacher*19, no. 2 (2009), 87-102; Barbara S. Stengel, "The Complex Case of Fear and Safe Space," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 6 (November 2010), 523-540; Lisa Weems, "From 'Home' to 'Camp': Theorizing the Space of Safety," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 6 (November 2010), 557-568.

participants opting out of the real work of politics or, at best, immersing themselves in pre-political preparation for that real work? I would say yes and no; that is: "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second.

Feeling welcome, wanted in the conversation, and free—even encouraged—to write frankly of (often lived experiences of) marginalization in a public venue certainly seems to offer a source of nourishment and support like that associated with Reagon's "barred rooms." And indeed, it is not uncommon for contributors to liken feminist blogs to havens, refuges, and homes.[117] The sites also provide spaces in which participants figure out who they are and what they want society to be, similar to C-R groups before them, and perhaps also to the therapeutic encounters that Nancy Luxon has recently suggested are sites of political education.[118] Some CMC participants first come to understand themselves as feminists by engaging on the blogs; for others, what it means to be and act as a feminist may change. For example, Shakesville commenter, "mcheg," writes:

> this morning I came to realize that what you all do here is not confined to this space. I realised that though I may not contribute here, you have changed the way I contribute in the world. Your impact goes so far beyond this safe space. I wanted you to know that, BECAUSE of the way I see this community move through the world, I started to move through it differently. I speak up when I see/hear hurtful speech and behavior more often, In spaces that are certainly not safe. I guess you should just know that what you have taken on in creating this safe space, goes so much farther than you may ever know.[119]

So, yes, there is likeness between the safe spaces of feminist blogs and those Reagon spoke of as "barred" against an inhospitable world.

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[117] Graham, 9 June 2009 (4:26p.m.), comment on Arkades et al., "'All In' Means All of Us." ; McEwan, "Commenting Policy."
[118] Luxon, *Crisis of Authority: Politics, Trust, and Truth-telling in Freud and Foucault.*
[119] mcheg, 10 June 2009 (8:43a.m.), comment on Arkades et al., "'All In' Means All of Us."

Despite this similarity, I think one would be mistaken to see these sites as apolitical or merely pre-political. Here we might recall hooks' account of the home-making as a political act in contexts where homespace is both denied and taken as indicative of one's lesser status. But we must also consider the different "spaces" at play. While it is possible to construct a blog like a barred room by requiring a password, this is not how feminist community blogs like Shakesville operate. On these blogs, feminists address strangers as feminists and invite them—but ultimately compel participants—to adopt their counter-public stance.

What's more, fraught discussions of what sort of space feminist blogs like Shakesville would offer as they transitioned from personal to community blogs indicates that what was meant by safe(r) spaces—who would be safe, what or who they would be safe from, and what this would mean for participants—is not clear or "given" by any pre-determined set of characteristics. Instead, it developed over time, in and through exchanges on the blogs.

Consider, for example, that McEwan and other Shakers made regular use of the word "lame" in first several years that Shakesville was up and running (there were lots of references to "John McLame," for example). The term was only designated "off-limits" after Shakers contacted McEwan expressing that they found the word ablist and marginalizing. In subsequent years anti-ableism become a far more visible dimension of the blog. For example, Shakesville has participated or advocated participation in BADD: Blogging Against Disablism Day since 2009 and, in 2010, the "Today in Disablism"

series was introduced.[120] As a result of this and similar changes, a not insignificant number of individuals who previously identified as Shakers "departed" or were expelled from the blog after refusing the terms under which public speech could appear in its "safe space." Indeed, many of the most vociferous critics of Shakesville's increasingly inclusive (in one sense)—but also undoubtedly more rigid and demanding—commenting policy were former regulars on the blog.

It's quite natural—that is, I think it's built into a dominant ideal of good public speech and writing—to read the above account of ablist language and look at these sites and not see political action, to see instead something like hysterics splitting hairs, cloying sentimentality, or perhaps therapy. But doing so fails to make sense of the strange mix of vulnerable bodies and strong words that are fixtures of these sites.

To paint them as spaces of the uniquely sensitive individuals obscures their claim—at times delivered in a stridently unsympathetic reference to "fee-fees" (feelings) and "male tears"[121]—that their practices aren't about feeling good or comfortable, but about justice and the pervasive, often banal inequalities that differentially shape life outcomes. Indeed, in the account that opens this chapter, McEwan recasts the miffed correspondent who wrote a lengthy complaint following being banned as oversensitive. That these representations of abrasive humor generally fail to appear in mainstream

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[120] For example, McEwan and other Shakers made regular use of the word "lame" in first couple years that Shakesville was up and running (lots of references to "John McLame," for example). The term was designated off-limits after a Shaker wrote to McEwan expressing that it was ablist. In subsequent years (dis)ableism has become a recurring topic on the blog. The category "Today in Disablism" was begun in 2010, during which time there were 20 posts tagged under it. Through November 1, 2011, there have been 19 posts tagged "Today in Disablism."

[121] The Feminist microblog *Misandry*, offers a great example. *Misandry* uses GIFs (short, animated graphics) to parody the notion that feminism advocates the hatred and persecution of men and mock readers who write in expressing their discomfort with, or sense of being "picked on" by, feminist analyses. At the same time, the microblog uses content notes to alert readers to ableism and cis-sexism, among other things, when the authors deem such alerts to be appropriate. See: http://male-tears.tumblr.com/.

representations—or are taken literally as proof that feminists are "man haters" (which of course overlooks the many feminists who are men)—is political and part of a long-term resistance to visible feminist publicity online, as my second chapter illustrated.

In arguing that online feminist "safe spaces" and the practices they engender constitute a practice of counter-publicity aimed at refiguring authoritative public address, my objective is not to figure "safe spaces" as the solution to exclusionary practices of publicity. Indeed, contestation within the feminist blogosphere over the "reasonable" scope and expectation of "safety" illustrates that the political stakes go all the way down. What's more, taking seriously the ways imagined public spaces and public selves shape expectations, practices, and the built design of different sites means that the physical reality of, for example, a psychosomatic response to "triggering" language is a secondary, rather than primary focus of my research. Put otherwise, my claim is that the trigger warning do work regardless of whether a reader is enabled, through its inclusion, to avoid a harmful psychosomatic response. That said, we can (and I do, in the following chapter), argue that figuring the public self as embodied, vulnerable, and entangled in relations of obligations to the strangers addressed, is a politically productive imaginary for those invested in a democratic citizenry that cares for each other and sees itself as ineluctably embedded in larger structures.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON 'TRIGGER WARNINGS': TOUGH SUBJECTS, REVOLTING SUBJECTS, AND THE PUBLICIZATION OF STRUCTURAL HARM

I. Introduction

In recent years, trigger warnings—used to notify readers of content that may elicit or "trigger" an adverse psychosomatic response and discussed in Chapter Three as part of feminist counter-public practice online—have traveled beyond the social media contexts in which they developed.[1] Mainstream feminist blogger Amanda Marcotte dubbed 2013 "the year of the trigger warning" after well-known television producer Shonda Rhimes tweeted agreement with fans indicating a trigger warning would have been appropriate before an episode of *Scandal* including a rape scene.[2] In point of fact,

[1] Trigger warnings have hardly remained unchanged in social media contexts, as Chapter Three elaborates. It appears that their first migration was from Internet forums intended for the discussion of trauma, disorder, and recovery. *Bodies Under Siege* (BUS), a web board founded in 1996 dedicated to recovery-oriented discussion of self-harm but which expanded to include forums for discussion of sexual assault and eating disorders, has been cited as one of the first to use trigger warnings. Whether feminist bloggers initially adopted trigger warnings in response to requests from readers, or those blogging brought this practice with them from forums like BUS is unclear, but one can find them being used on *Ms. Magazine* message board in the late 1990s, when participants discussed sexual assault. By the early to mid-2000s, one can find trigger warnings used without explanation on online feminist safe space, and by 2010 feminists' use of trigger warnings was common enough to draw attention—and critique—from anti-feminist Susannah Breslin. See: Amanda Hess, "Trigger Warnings and Being an Asshole," April 16, 2010, *The Sexist,*http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/sexist/2010/04/16/trigger-warnings-and-being-an-asshole/; Susannah Breslin, "Trigger Warning: This Blog Post May Freak You the F*** Out," *True/Slant*, April 13, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20150510014919/http://trueslant.com/susannahbreslin/2010/04/13/trigger-warning-this-blog-post-may-freak-you-the-f-out/.

[2] Amanda Marcotte, "The Year of the Trigger Warning," *Slate*, December 30, 2013, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/12/30/trigger_warnings_from_the_feminist_blogosphere_to_shonda_rhimes_in_2013.html. Tweet available at: https://twitter.com/shondarhimes/status/402575982302740480.

Rhimes and her fans were speaking of the use (or creative misuse) of the TV parental guidelines advising "viewer discretion." What was striking was Rhimes' ready recognition and use of the term "trigger warning," which Marcotte suggested marked its admission as a "mainstream concept," even as she notes she does not use them herself and predicted "that most people will end up tuning them out."[3]

Recent responses to the prospect of trigger warnings appearing in the classroom via student request or university policy—generating ample discussion both amongst academics and of academia—suggest Marcotte's prediction was hasty. Those taking issue with trigger warnings argue they have a deadening or "chilling effect" on discussion, and cultivate demanding yet intellectually and emotionally enfeebled students and readers.[4] Proponents have suggested trigger warnings can be helpful "tools" that enable students and others to engage challenging material, cultivate empathy, and incite or improve discussion.

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[3] Marcotte, "The Year of the Trigger Warning." Though a feminist blogger, Marcotte's dismissive stance on trigger warnings is not entirely surprising. See my conclusion for more on Marcotte and differences between the "safe spaces" of feminist blogging and mainstream online feminisms.

[4] American Association of University Professors, "On Trigger Warnings," *American Association of University Professors*, August 2014, http://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings; Jack Halberstam, "You Are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma," *Bully Bloggers*, July 5, 2014, https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/; Jenny Jarvie, "Trigger Happy," *New Republic*, March 3, 2014, http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116842/trigger-warnings-have-spread-blogs-college-classes-thats-bad; Laura Kipnis, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 27, 2015, https://chronicle.com/article/Sexual-Paranoia-Strikes/190351/; Greg Lukianoff, "The Coddling of the American Mind," *The Atlantic*, September 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/; Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, "The Backstory to 'The Coddling of the American Mind'," *The Atlantic,* September 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/greg-lukianoffs-story/399359/; Richard J. McNally, "Hazards Ahead: The Problem With Trigger Warnings, According to the Research," *Pacific Standard Magazine*, May 20, 2014, http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/hazards-ahead-problem-trigger-warnings-according-research-81946; Jennifer Medina, "Warning: The Literary Canon Could Make Students Squirm," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/us/warning-the-literary-canon-could-make-students-squirm.html?_r=1; Edward Schlosser, "I'm a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me," *Vox*, June 3, 2015, http://www.vox.com/2015/6/3/8706323/college-professor-afraid.

This chapter takes the recent migration of "trigger warnings" as an inroad for exploring broader reception to the vision and practice of what I earlier introduced as a "feminized" democratic subject. I argue that *how* stories of the current "crisis" associated with trigger warnings get told—how trigger warnings work in the framing of who "we" are and what is befalling "us" today—are illustrative of a broad and viscerally felt attachment to a modern or even hyper-modern subject. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's work on the "feeling of structure," I argue that those advocating for trigger warnings appear on the scene of broader public discourse as "killjoys."[5] As such, they threaten the positive affect that signals "fitting" participants in online speech, classrooms, and politics, which also keep us affectively attached to—delighted by, admiring of, desirous of mimicking—resilient, adaptive, "tough" subjects not unlike those incited by neoliberal discourse.

I conclude by staging an encounter with contemporary theorists who envision affirming, ethical self-cultivation as a means to dethrone what Stephen White terms modernity's "Teflon subject." I propose that online feminists cultivate a democratic subject not unlike that which recent political theory has sought to cultivate via affirming visions of ethical life. Yet her reception suggests potential challenges for those advocating affirmative ethics as the means by which we might arrive at more generous ways of being and moving in the world.

[5] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness.*

II. Trigger Warnings Go Traveling

For the most part, the popular response to the migration of trigger warnings beyond marginal social media contexts has been critical. Those taking issue with TWs and in particular their spread beyond marginal websites express concern that the warnings amount to "coddling," which will have a deadening effect on public discussion.[6] Often, after correctly noting that—and here I quote from recent critic, Jenny Jarvie of *New Republic*—"[w]e cannot anticipate every potential trigger," they move to assert that there is thus "no rational basis for applying" them at all.[7]

What's more, those who want or might benefit from trigger warnings are represented as oversensitive, fragile, and committed to remaining so rather than moving beyond a past trauma. Indeed, it is common for critics to explain that the "proper" way to recover from trauma is through exposure, which is figured as incompatible with the use of trigger warnings.[8] These critiques share in failing to discuss how trigger warnings function in the feminist blogs they generally (and somewhat mistakenly) credit with creating.[9] They likewise rarely if ever offer a discussion of how trigger warnings function in classrooms, where they have been used voluntarily by some faculty for at least several years.[10] In place of these histories of actual practice, trigger warnings are termed or

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[6] Greg Lukianoff, "The Coddling of the American Mind."
[7] Jenny Jarvie, "Trigger Happy."
[8] Lukianoff and Haidt, "The Backstory to 'The Coddling of the American Mind'"; McNally, "Hazards Ahead: The Problem With Trigger Warnings, According to the Research."
[9] See Footnote 1.
[10] Ruxandra Looft, "How Do Trigger Warnings Fit into the Classroom Lesson Plan?" *Shakesville*, February 12, 2013, http://www.shakesville.com/2013/02/how-do-trigger-warnings-fit-into.html.

clustered with a "new P.C.," or political correctness, that includes the language of microaggressions.[11]

There are, undoubtedly, relevant connections between trigger warnings and the wide range of issues grouped under the terms "political correctness," including representations of diversity in the academy (as it pertains to students and teachers, the research foci of departments, or classroom materials), how to speak across politicized identities, accommodating individuals with disabilities after the Americans with Disabilities Act passed, and critiques and activism to regulate or suppress pornography. In narratives of trigger warnings, most of these "old P.C." issues are depicted as having died a well-deserved death in the 1990s (or at least ceased to take center stage), and those that are not are no longer classed as a form of political correctness (e.g., accommodation to disability).[12] In characterizing trigger warnings as a new P.C., authors prime one to read for dead ideas and indeed, inherently dead-end ideas.

The criticism arising in response to the trigger warning's migration has created strange bedfellows: liberals dedicated to free and civil debate, libertarians committed to unregulated speech, and feminist and queer theorists concerned with neoliberal co-optation have found common cause in denouncing the practice. There are differences across these critiques, notably the feminist and queer concern with a neoliberal propensity to individuate structural violence and constitute all actors as consumers (in this case, students are thought to be at risk of becoming consumers of universities,

[11] "Microaggressions" refers to the subtle means by hierarchies of value reproduced through interpersonal interactions (as when a person of color is asked where they're "really" from).
[12] Melanie Yergeau, "Disable All the Things: On Affect, Metadata, & Audience," (keynote address, Computers and Writing 2014 conference, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, June 6, 2104), https://vimeo.com/97721996.

"shopping" for an experience that will never be uncomfortable). Nonetheless, the commonalities bear examination. Below, I elaborate on critical responses to trigger warnings found in Jonathan Chait's "classic liberal" (his characterization) article in *New York Magazine* and feminist and queer theorist Jack Halberstam's polemical blog on the topic.

Real Victims: The Shrinking Space for (Jonathan Chait's) Ideas

Jonathan Chait's "Not a Very P.C. Thing to Say" (2015) nicely illustrates some of the ways by which mainstream critiques of trigger warnings proceed. Consider the following passage introducing both trigger warnings and microaggressions:

> At a growing number of campuses, professors now attach "trigger warnings" to texts that may upset students, and there is a campaign to eradicate "microaggressions," or small social slights that might cause searing trauma. These newly fashionable terms merely repackage a central tenet of the first P.C. movement: that people should be expected to treat even faintly unpleasant ideas or behaviors as full-scale offenses.

Chait does not offer an example of a trigger warning or describe how it might be used. His explanation for why warnings are being "attach[ed] to texts"— because they "may upset students"—invites the reader to consider the seemingly limitless material that might upset, mischaracterizing and trivializing what those who use trigger warnings argue is at stake.

Similarly, microaggressions defined as "small social slights that might cause searing trauma" fails to provide an adequate definition; but juxtaposing "small social slights" with "searing trauma" nonetheless conveys that the language of microaggressions is premised on a drastic imbalance between cause and effect. Detached

from any account of structural inequality and its reproduction, one might well summon to mind an isolated occasion where one was not invited out for drinks by co-workers or a romantic partner who failed to notice a new haircut.

The repeated framing of trigger warning and other P.C. speech practices as the overreactions or the disordered reaction of those who cannot see the obvious disparity between "small… slights" and "searing trauma," the "faintly unpleasant" and "full-scale offens[ive]," traffics in gendered tropes of the hysteric touched on in Chapter Three. What's more, collective speech practices voluntarily adopted in many spaces and recently advocated for in new spaces are refigured as unreasonable restraints or impositions, in the form of "expect[ations]," on a "people" that includes Chait and his (imagined) reader, but not those to whom he attributes these expectations. As a result, those who read for trigger warnings are depicted as dependent on a people who have no such dependencies themselves.

As with most mainstream writing on the subject, Chait's account of trigger warning hinges on his reader not "getting it," on making the language of "trigger warnings" and "microaggressions" utterly alien. Chait's prose works to achieve this end by introducing, but under-explaining, new terminology and practices, and "over-explaining" how one is ought to regard the new, but functionally empty terms.

The Queer Resilience of Jack Halberstam

Where Chait sees trigger warnings as the return of "P.C. culture" and an alarmingly resurgent and cohesive radical left, feminist and queer theorist Jack

Halberstam* sees a rhetoric that divides and undermines just such a movement. In her polemical blog post on the topic, "You Are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma," Halberstam, like Chait, characterizes trigger warnings—alongside physical safe spaces, especially those for LGBTQ youth, and criticism directed towards the "appropriation" of bigoted slurs—as indicative of the "re-emergence" of the language and practices of an earlier (1980s, early 1990s) political left.

Unlike Chait, Halberstam does not associate this moment with the political correctness of a frightening, illiberal left, but with a feminism increasingly divided against itself. Where Chait suggests Bill Clinton's successful bid for presidency put an end to an earlier P.C. moment, Halberstam argues it was "books on neoliberalism, postmodernism, gender performativity and racial capital that turned the focus away from the wounded self" toward structural inequality abetted by capitalist exploitation and the "multitudes, collectivities, collaborations, and projects" that might challenge inequality and exploitation.

Halberstam's divided feminism warrants further comment. On the one hand, he suggests, it was the space given to a "weepy[,] white lady feminism" that divided the feminist movement. On the other hand, it is a specifically a "rhetoric of harm and trauma that casts all social difference in terms of hurt feelings and that divides up politically allied subjects into hierarchies of woundedness." The former ("weepy[,] white lady

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*Jack Halberstam, who formerly published under the name Judith Halberstam, indicates no pronoun preference though it may be equally apt to say he prefers the ambiguity of "no preference." In her own words: "I think my floating gender pronouns capture well the refusal to resolve my gender ambiguity that has become a kind of identity for me" (See: Jack Halberstam, "On Pronouns," personal website, September 3, 2012, http://www.jackhalberstam.com/category/uncategorized/gender-pronouns/). As just performed here, I will float between the use of conventional masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to Halberstam.

feminism") raises the prospect of elite white women commandeering a more radical feminist movement in order to serve their narrow interests. The use of the term "lady" signals a privileged class position, but also (and especially when paired with "weepy" and "white") almost Victorian visions of elite women whose delicate sensibilities and prudish propriety were used to discipline, through shame but also legislation, "proper" and "respectable" behavior.

Meanwhile, the latter (feminists obsessed with "hierarchies of woundedness") raise the specter of "identity politics." This specter takes on some flesh when Halberstam writes: "Once upon a time, the appellation 'queer' named an opposition to identity politics, a commitment to coalition, a vision of alternative worlds. Now it has become a weak umbrella term for a confederation of identitarian concerns."

On Halberstam's account, "weepy white lady feminism gave way to reveal a multi-racial, poststructuralist, intersectional feminism" in the 1990s once "people began to laugh, loosened up… got over themselves and began to talk." Talking ultimately lead to the "recogni[tion] that the enemy was not among [them]." Halberstam grants that her generational narrative "flatten[s] out" complicated histories and is polemical in its effort to make a point that must be made: namely, that talk of harm, trauma, and bigoted language is regressive, divisive, and de-politicizing.

One of the major support struts of Halberstam's polemic is, polemically put: "I have feminists and queers of color on my side." In associating trigger warnings exclusively with weepy, "anti-porn, anti-fun," white ladies, Halberstam summons the figure of the elite white woman controlling the agenda, even as the identity politics he

references is largely considered to encompass the practices of non-white feminists and other left activists.

Casting the publicization of vulnerability and harm on "weepy white women" obscures the fact that feminists of color have repeatedly and compellingly called out a broader feminist movement, arguing that "the enemy" was in fact very much among them at times. What's more, this framing plays into the trope of the "strong Black woman" whose strength is measured by a capacity to endure, to continue on in the face of unrelenting hardship. Halberstam in effect uses queers and feminists of color as a prop indicating she is on the "right" side of things.

Spaces of collective action may not often feel like uncomplicated "homes,"[13] but I question Halberstam's assumption that these spaces will or should feel like a night out at one's favorite comedy club. The desire for humor, pleasure, and play can be turned to disciplinary purposes just as well as the desire for safety, which need not be synonymous with comfort, and neither of which can be determined *a priori* as individualizing, depoliticizing, or otherwise "bad politics."

III. Tough Subjects: Neoliberalism, "Slave Morality" and Thick Skins

While Halberstam's account is deeply problematic, trigger warnings and especially the prospect of university policy mandating their usage might reasonably raise concerns about neoliberal cooptation. Neoliberalism lends itself to the individuation, privatization, and commercialization of structural harms. In turn, these harms are figured as fixable

[13] See Chapter Three.

through legalist or bureaucratic solutions that strengthen the very institutions that are implicated in reproducing the harms.

The slippage, noted at the beginning of this chapter, between trigger warnings and TV parental guidelines in an instance involving the depiction of rape on an episode of *Scandal* presents a helpful inroad into the accusation that trigger warnings are infantilizing. U.S. television does not use the language of trigger warnings. Instead, shows with "mature" content may open with an announcement that "viewer discretion is advised," accompanied by a brief explanation of what prompts the advisory. Explanations often cite "content labels," in addition to the audience rating, specified in industry-wide TV parental guidelines. Parental guidelines were instituted in response to the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and, as the name implies, were intended to facilitate parents' control over content viewed by children.[14]

Paired with the V-chip included in new TVs, parents could enforce a blanket ban on shows based on the intended audience and/or specified content. The content labels include "D" for "suggestive dialogue (usually means talk about sex)", "L" for "coarse or crude language," "S" for "sexual situations," "V" for violence, "TV-Y7"for shows for children ages seven and above, and "FV" for "fantasy violence."[15] The prevalence and intensity of these content categories determine the audience rating, which specifies who is intended to view the program and directs—at times urges—an appropriate parental response. Programs designated for "mature audiences" (TV-MA) may contain all of the

[14] "Understanding the TV Ratings," *The TV Parental Guidelines*, http://www.tvguidelines.org/ratings.htm, (accessed December 17, 2015).
[15] Ibid.

above and their adult audiences are presumed to have an unproblematic or masterful relationship to such content.

Reflecting the conservative, Christian sensibilities of a Republican base and the congressman who advocated for them, parental guidelines are intended for use by parents in protecting children from exposure to "adult" content, especially sexually explicit material. As such, parental guidelines can be viewed as exemplary of what Lauren Berlant theorizes as infantile citizenship, which specifies a tradition of imagining that "the best of U.S. national subjectivity can be read in its childlike manifestations and in a polity that organizes its public sphere around a commitment to making a world that could sustain an idealized infantile citizen."[16]

The infantile citizen represents an aspiration for unreflective, unproblematic national belonging, premised on "a belief in the state's commitment to representing the best interests of ordinary people."[17] As such, the category of citizenship "contract[s]… to something smaller than agency: patriotic inclination, default social membership, or the simple possession of a normal national character."[18] In our contemporary moment, Berlant argues, children, and especially the fetus, have been mobilized by conservatives as the embodiment of the ideal infantile citizen.[19] In the case of TV parental guidelines, a collective "we" is called upon to protect this ideal citizen, in part by ensuring "ordinary people" remain a recognizable category, attached to nostalgic, often overtly Christian, classed, raced, and gendered visions of normalcy and childhood.

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[16] Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, 28.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 27.
[19] Although the child seems an obvious figure for the ideal infantile citizen, Berlant traces the infantile citizen as far back as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, in which adult citizens' childlike love of the nation is lauded, but also seen to render them vulnerable to becoming "passive, and overdependent on the 'immense tutelary power' of the state…" (Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 27).

In contrast, trigger warnings are intended for a general audience, inclusive of those who have experienced trauma, which both reflects and plays a part in reproducing structural violence. In this sense, trigger warnings might trouble a vision of "normal" citizens as the developmental outcome of protective parents empowered by the state and television industry. Where TV parental guidelines make safety and normalcy the work of individuals, first through the figure of discerning parents and then through that of the "mature" viewer, trigger warnings make safety a collective practice and challenge any notion of "normalcy" that is unreflective of the all too normal experience of systemic inequality that manifests in sexual assault, racialized violence, and ablist exclusion.

Students advocating for the use of trigger warnings are simultaneously advocating for "equality," by prompting or even compelling a conversation about what we read and discuss and how these are framed. The underlying or motivating claim is, in effect, that structural violence and its local manifestations in personal trauma are harmful and a bar to equality. We can see this in the following summary from a Columbia University forum on the topic:

> Students… have felt that Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization's curricula are often presented as a set of universal, venerated, incontestable principles and texts that have founded Western society. Such a presentation does not allow room for their experiences in the Western world or in class discussions. While these founding principles have been liberating in many ways, instructors should more consistently acknowledge during class discussions that many of these same principles have created an unjust, unequal, and oppressive existence for many…[20]

[20] Members of the Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board, "Our Identities Matter in Core Classrooms," *Columbia Spectator*, April 30, 2015, *http://columbiaspectator.com/opinion/2015/04/30/our-identities-matter-core-classrooms,* (accessed December 17, 2015); BWOG Staff. "Reading Lit Hum's Rapes." *BWOG: Columbia Student News*. May 10, 2014. http://bwog.com/2014/05/10/reading-lit-hums-rapes/, (accessed December 17, 2015).

The effects and affects of the language of "safety" and "harm"—like that of "equality," "freedom," or "pleasure"—cannot be wholly determined in advance. At the same time, it is surely also the case that part of why the former are being taken up is attributable to a neoliberal discursive context where these words have traction. What's more, in the context of the hierarchically structured relationship between instructors and students, where the former is both expert and authority, appeals to equality are less likely to read as coherent.

Might trigger warnings be dramatically repurposed as a tool for the bureaucratic administration of harms? It's certainly conceivable, but the bigger threat on Halberstam's account stems from the "divisiveness" they sow amongst potential allies. But where does this divisiveness come from? Wendy Brown's classic work on *ressentiment* in Left politics (which Halberstam cites) provides some insight.

Revisiting "Wounded Attachments"

In her now classic chapter and article on "wounded attachments," Brown mobilizes Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* to diagnose the political left's difficulty in coalescing in ways that would support a radical political project. Brown suggests the "wounded attachments" of the political left consist of political vision and activism circumscribed by identities that are "effects of disciplinary and liberal modalities of power. " These identities also kept us bound to an unattainable idea: liberalism's false universal, embodied in the figure of the white, masculine, middle-class individual.[21] In other words, the exclusion that first motivated the politicization of identity persists,

[21] Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 61.

keeping one attached to an identity formed through an enduring "wound," which makes one amenable to liberalism's legalist adjudication of harm.

Brown then elucidates how liberalism incites *ressentiment*, "the moralizing revenge of the powerless, 'the triumph of the weak as the weak,'"[22] which explains the left's difficulty in forming a durable, collective politicized identity. Attached to an identity forged through identification and protest by individuals whose political vision and identity is grounded in affirmation of their own strength, excellence, good fortune, and so on, *ressentiment* compels one to "establish[] suffering as the measure of social virtue" in a bid to redeem one's painful past.[23] Having elevated the suffering that defined it as the mark of "the good," wounded politicized identity takes pleasure in revenge and the castigation of those who have not shared in their suffering, promising a poor political ally.

Seeking a way forward, Brown notes the virtue of forgetting before quickly concluding that, "at least in its unreconstructed Nietzschean form, [counseling forgetting] seems inappropriate if not cruel."[24] Instead, she suggests setting aside Nietzsche on the grounds that his "skills as a diagnostician often reach the limits of their political efficacy in his privileging of individual character and capacity over the transformative possibilities of collective political intervention, in his remove from the refigurative possibilities of political conversation or transformation."[25]

Brown stands in a somewhat strange and shifting relationship to the diagnostic tools she adopts in reading Nietzsche for insight into identity politics and the seeming

[22] Ibid., 67.
[23] Ibid., 70.
[24] Ibid., 74.
[25] Ibid.

stuck-ness of the political left. Most obviously, she abandons him in the final pages and recasts a desire for revenge as a desire for recognition, as when she writes "more than revenge," the pain identity politics seems to wear on its sleeve might reflect a desire to "be heard into a certain release, recognized into self-overcoming, incited into possibilities for triumphing over, and hence, losing, itself."[26] It is interesting to note that Brown concludes by suggesting communicative practices as a means past the "impasse" of identity politics. The practices she suggests center on the articulation of a desired, collective future rather than, or at least alongside, one's identity. So, for example, Brown suggests replacing "I am" with "I want this for us."[27]

There is another, less obvious moment where Brown's use of Nietzsche as a diagnostician appears unstable. As Rebecca Stringer observes in her important work on the feminist disavowal and discomfort with the language of "victimhood,"[28] Brown suggests that tension between liberalism's promise of individual freedom and equality means that even those individuals who are seen to embody liberalism's false universal—white, (at least) middle-class men—are "incite[d]" to *ressentiment*.[29] In other words, the aristocratic morality to which slave morality is envisioned as reacting doesn't exist. In its stead is another slave morality and perhaps, above all, a desire to be Nietzsche's noble barbarian, shaping and then finding the world in one's image and concluding, not unlike the God of Genesis, that *it was* good.

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[26] Ibid., 74-5.
[27] Ibid, 75. In later works, Brown returns to themes of woundedness and a stuck left, finding inspiration in the radical democratic theories while expressing discomfort with the scholarship of women's studies. Whether this discomfort is rooted in a perceived attachment to "women" as a stable identity, or to a focus on reactionary, "wounded" political projects is not always clear. See: Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*.
[28] Stringer. *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times.*
[29] Brown, *States of Injury*, 66-7.

"Happy" Slaves

Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* presents an alternative reading of Nietzsche's slave morality, and specifically his characterization of it as reactionary, that is, as a negation of that which it is not (the strong, the best, the happy). Ahmed suggests that Nietzsche misreads the significance of the aristocratic morality which declares: "we the noble, we the good, we the beautiful, we the happy ones!" Where Nietzsche finds "spontaneous" self-affirmation, Ahmed suggest we "reread [this self-affirming] happiness as the *displacement of [good] fortune*."[30]

Nietzsche does not advocate a return to aristocratic morality. However, in obscuring the ways in which the aristocratic morality might be understood as reactive and his slave morality as creative, in making an affectively charged distinction between the creative and reactive, the active and passive, Ahmed suggests he obscures the relationship between contingent good fortune and self-affirmation. Because Nietzsche also sets up the latter (self-affirmation) as the litmus test of a morality that takes the mortal world as its reference, one ends up with a vision of the good tethered to having the goods.

Nietzsche was writing at a time when a Christian vision of morality focused on the afterlife and the diminishment of desire was pervasive. But the charge that a vision of the good life or a political project or identity is "merely reactive" continues to be a powerful means of discrediting it as a worthwhile vision. Similarly, the seeming persistence of negative emotions—anger, dissatisfaction, unhappiness—directed towards the status quo is taken as an indication that one lacks a vision of the good and has only a

[30] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 207 (emphasis Ahmed's).

vision of the "not good" which, because derivative, lacks an affirmative orientation.

Equally important, Ahmed argues, is that, in the context of structural inequality, the desire to be or to perform the self-affirming aristocratic subject, a happy subject, can be perverse. This is because the form of happiness, the vision of the "good life," afforded the marginalized keeps them attached to ways of being and moving in the world amenable to the very system in which one was excluded or marginalized. This may mean, as in Ahmed's reading of Sophie in Rousseau's *Emile*, that one finds happiness in making others happy (or at least one is *supposed* to).

In our contemporary moment, one form that "happiness" takes is consenting to the privatization of harm and trauma, which reflects but also facilitates the persistence of structural inequality. Insofar as those who suffer structural harm and trauma are encouraged to address this suffering in a broader public discourse, it is as heroic survivors or overcomers, those who, by remaining unbent and unbowed, confirm that "we" need not move in the world differently. In these instances—*Emile*'s Sophie and the heroic overcomer—"happiness" requires that one surrender ways of being and moving in the world that would challenge its terms and not only its visuals. It might also, as Lauren Berlant argues in *Cruel Optimism*, encourage one to mistake surviving, for the "good life."[31]

IV. Thick Skins and White Fragility

We can see something of this in Roxane Gay's thoughtful account of trigger warnings, "The Illusion of Safety/The Safety of Illusion," first published on the literary

[31] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

website *The Rumpus* and recently republished in *Bad Feminist.* Gay writes:

> I used to think I didn't have triggers because I told myself I was tough. I was steel. I was broken beneath the surface, but my skin was forged, impenetrable. Then I realized I had all kinds of triggers… There are things that rip my skin open and reveal what lies beneath, but I don't believe in trigger warnings.[32]

More precisely, Gay does not believe in the reality or promise of safety that she takes trigger warnings to hold out. As a survivor of sexual assault with her own, deeply personal triggers, she knows any such promise cannot be perfectly realized. Even so, Gay suggests that they "might be ineffective, impractical, and necessary for creating safe spaces all at once," noting that the "illusion of safety is as frustrating as it is powerful."[33]

Gay concludes by meditating on the connection between her not "feel[ing] safe" or "believing in safety" and her "fascinat[ion]" with "enduring": "Human endurance fascinates me, probably too much because more often than not, I think of life in terms of enduring instead of living."[34] What can we make of this complex compulsion to "endure" rather than "live," to "be impenetrable"?

On the one hand, it's eminently understandable as a defense against expecting harm and the failure—once more—of safety's promise. Aspiring to invulnerability makes it possible for Gay to endure, but it also circumscribes that existence, narrows its frame, and precludes "liv[ing]." What might this mean concretely?

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[32] Gay, *Bad Feminist*, 150-51. First published online: Roxane Gay, "The Illusion of Safety/The Safety of Illusion." *The Rumpus.* August 28, 2012. http://therumpus.net/2012/08/the-illusion-of-safetythe-safety-of-illusion/ (accessed December 17, 2015).
[33] Gay, *Bad Feminist,* 151.
[34] Ibid., 152.

The work of a number of Black feminist bloggers and scholars engaging the trope of the "strong Black woman" offers something of a challenge.[35] For example, responding to praise of the stoic strength of a young Black girl following the circulation of videos and images of her being sexually assaulted at a party, Robin Boylorn of Crunk Feminist Collective, writes:

> Maybe instead of being impressed that blackgirls can withstand so much suffering and become role models for strength, we should be concerned about their emotional wellness, their vulnerability, their humanity.
>
> I am not always strong. When I hurt, I cry. I sob deeply and from my belly releasing heartbreaking wails and screams until I feel more empty than sad. There is nothing wrong with feeling pain and expressing it but society doesn't let black victims mourn, society doesn't want black people to feel. We are made to believe that our feelings are dangerous so we suppress them. We are told, repeatedly, even amongst ourselves that we are nonfragile so we think we must live up to those expectations.[36]

Who can be mourned? Who can mourn without seeming over-sensitive? Without being, therefore, weak? Whose weakness warrants consideration? Judith Butler's *Frames of War* suggests that "grievable lives," those that we recognize and mourn when lost and harmed are also those that inspire collective action. From this perspective the compulsion to not feel or express pain, to "endure," might function to support the structural inequality to which it simultaneously provides some minimal, individualized protection.

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[35] Robin Boylorn, "Unbreakable or The Problem with Praising Blackgirl Strength," *Crunk Feminist Collective*, July 22, 2014, http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/07/22/unbreakable-or-the-problem-with-praising-blackgirl-strength/**;** Adee Roberson, "Precious Mettle: The Myth of the Strong Black Woman," *Bitch Media*, May 13, 2014, https://bitchmedia.org/article/precious-mettle-myth-strong-black-woman; ray(nise) cange, "Why I'm Not Ready To Rule Out Suicide In the Case of Sandra Bland," *Black Girl Dangerous*, July 23, 2015, http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2015/07/why-not-ready-rule-out-suicide-in-the-case-of-sandra-bland/.

[36] Boylorn, "Unbreakable or The Problem with Praising Blackgirl Strength." Similarly, Mia McKenzie of *Black Girl Dangerous* has written a novel, *The Summer We Got Free*, speaking to the ways in which those who are marginalized become attached to survival mechanisms that circumscribe the fullness of their lives.

On the other side of the expectation or compulsion to be invulnerable or to endure is a (policed) expectation to not disrupt the status quo. Robin DiAngelo's research on white fragility is important here. According to DiAngelo:

> White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. [37]

Aside from the fact that trigger warnings are used for race-related violence, the concept of white fragility can be helpful for thinking through the responses to trigger warnings and the ways they may both intensify and disrupt neoliberalism.

Fragile "Normal" Selves

Writing for the *New Yorker*, Jay Caspian Kang recalls a professor—well before trigger warnings were a talking point—who prefaced a graduate-level lecture on Nabokov's *Lolita* with this: "When you read 'Lolita,' keep in mind that what you're reading about is the systematic rape of a young girl."[38] Following this "unwelcome" pronouncement, Kang, who had previously turned to *Lolita* "whenever" he needed inspiration, found he "could no longer pick up the book without feeling the weight of his [professor's] judgment." He continues: "The professor wasn't wrong to point out the obvious about Humbert and Dolores Haze… but I haven't read 'Lolita' since."

[37] Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54-70.
[38] Jay Caspian Kang, "Trigger Warnings and the Novelist's Mind," *New Yorker Magazine*, May 21, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/trigger-warnings-and-the-novelists-mind.

In conversation with Alexandra Brodsky, an editor at the community blog Feministing, Kang recounts the above. Brodsky replies: "What a delight it must be to read a book full of graphic accounts of sexual violence and still have the book not be about sexual violence to you!" But then asks why a "depersonalized, apolitical reading [was] the one we should fight for." We might ask in turn: Why conclude that Kang's reading is "apolitical"? With this conclusion Brodsky undercuts the force of her first reply, which suggested there was something absurd about not seeing sexual violence as central to *Lolita*, rather like the absurdity of "not seeing race." And indeed Brodsky's reply calls to mind Kang's own frustration when a "white person would say… a book written by a person of color somehow 'transcended race,' as if that was the highest compliment that could be paid."

But I think the heart of the "problem" with trigger warnings can actually be found in Kang's confession that he "could no longer pick up the book without feeling the weight of his [professor's] judgment." What exactly is the judgment here? Here's what we know:

1. The professor prefaced a lecture on *Lolita* with admittedly "obvious" context.
2. Kang struggles and fails to rekindle his old relationship with the text ("I tried to put it out of my mind and enjoy Lolita's cunning, surprising games with language.")
3. Kang feels judged ("feeling the weight")
4. Kang characterizes that feeling as a response to the professor's judging him ("his judgment")

Kang attributes ownership of the judgment to the unnamed professor, but it seems to come from Kang himself. Indeed, I would argue *this* is the "personalizing" or "individualizing" moment facilitated by trigger warnings: a statement of "the obvious" is

transmuted—by Kang—into judgment of Kang (presumably that his pleasure in reading *Lolita* might reflect or share in a pleasure in sexually assaulting girls). But Kang recalls all the reasons *Lolita* inspired him, and finding no trace of "enjoys assaulting girls," feels wrongly accused (by himself, you'll recall) and upset at the professor whose prefatory comments function as a bar to the pleasures of his prior, innocent read.

The threat (and potential) of trigger warnings is not that individuals, like Kang, who experience them as "unwelcome intrusion[s]" into the hermeneutically sealed sanctuary created through the communion of reader with text come to see that sanctuary as mythical and feel guilty for the innocent pleasure he once took in an author and defensive about a lost, "innocent" relationship with a text. Of course, insofar as Kang, owing to his guilt, withdraws from conversation on the topic, his professor's reminder might indeed have had a "chilling effect" on Kang's speech (even as it created more space for Brodsky's to appear).

The threat of trigger warnings is that individuals like Kang read *Lolita* reflecting on the possible connections between the pleasures of Nabokov's masterful, "cunning" prose and "the systemic rape of a young girl." But such reflection in no way obliges one to self-flagellate or burn books: the threatening call is rather to stand in a more critical relationship to pleasure and displeasure, to the ways both draw us unthinkingly, viscerally into alliances and repels us from the wounds of others that we may nonetheless play a part in creating through our silences, through sheltering our own imagined innocence.

IV. Conclusion: Bad Affect and Revolting Subjects

Chapter Three elaborated on a digital feminist practice of counter-publicity that constitutes the speaking subject of democratic discourse as embodied, vulnerable, and embedded in relations of obligation to strangers addressed that extend beyond good intentions to a consideration of effects. I also argued that the collaborative construction of a "safe space" offers a lived, felt experience of agency as entangled with others and the world, e.g., when a writer's use of a trigger warning is understood to enable another's engagement with difficult content. CMC tools, including filters and moderation software, their absence and failures, touched on in both my second and third chapters, offer another example of the ways in which online feminist counter-public constitute a feminized subject whose agency is more readily experienced as non-sovereign.

A *feminized* subject is not a feminine-gendered subject, nor one that would privilege women and others who more nearly embody conventional feminine attribute. Rather, such a subject is a corrective to the masculine gendered subject of modernity: agentic, but not sovereign, a being whose individuality is ineluctably bound up in worldly matter and meaning.[39] Although pursuit and inquiries into a feminized subject have long been a feminist preoccupation, the growing interest in a chastened or humbled subject, cultivated through ethics inspired by new approaches to theorizing matter, language, and their entanglement, is illustrative of a broadening of this concern. Here, to be "chastened" or "humbled" is a desirable thing; it brings one in closer alignment with the

[39] My choice of words is, in part, a deliberate provocation, an effort to stage the sort of "unhappy" moment my work on the reception of trigger warnings describes.

reality that we have never been discrete, sovereign agents, and that imagining ourselves as such paves the way for exploitive relations with human and non-human others.[40]

This new materialist or post-human critique is different, although certainly indebted to the feminist critique that the modern subject is masculine-gendered.[41] Characterized as a naturally free and autonomous individual, this subject was initially the preserve of men and required women to be subject to necessity (rather than free), dependent and charged with care of dependents, and seen as part of a group or caste (rather than as individuals). In short his "natural" capacities were leveraged off of—and so depended upon—others' *lack* of such subject-status.[42]

And yet, even as many political theorists have come to agree that conceptualizing individuals as independent, discrete, sovereign agents is theoretically unsound, ontologically incoherent, and conducive to the construction of a class of sub-equals, the digital revolution seems to offer some a more perfectly lived and felt experience of precisely these things. We saw this in Chapter Two, where feminists' complaint with (anti-feminist) men dominating Usenet newsgroups intended for the discussion of women's issues or feminism was often met with the insistence that users simply needed to use the various filters correctly to achieve desired outcomes. The excessive speech of Mark Ethan Smith, which spilled out of its "appropriate" newsgroup into several

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[40] Washick and Wingrove, "Politics That Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists."

[41] Indeed there's a great deal of overlap between the two, which is unsurprising given the foundational role of feminist theorists like Donna Haraway. Science and Technology Studies has also been highly influential.

[42] Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women*; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, especially Ch. 6 Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* offers a similar account centered on race.

"general" newsgroups, offered a brief, unpleasant experience to many unfamiliar with the ways filters might utterly fail to approach much less achieve desired outcomes.[43]

Beyond the unequally achievable promise of finding or making CMC in one's image, the Internet and various manifestations of the digital—conceptualized as a "tool" or "resource"—are often used to incite individuals to be resilient, adaptive, lifelong learners (still employable) who can always "reinvent themselves." Similarly, in the context of CMC—then and now—"toughening up" or "growing a thick skin" is routinely presented as a solution to online harassment. If we take seriously the discursive democratic theory on the cultivation of the modern democratic subject through the circulation of speech and writing, these things surely matter.

However, Left political theory has increasingly gravitated to affirmative political or ethical projects as the means of cultivating what I have termed a feminized subject. Doing so, these projects fail to grapple with the bad affect that accompanies a subject whose agency is not imagined as sovereign and indeed requires others, and whose individuality does not rise above but rather develops in relation to others: such a subject is burdensome, imposing, perhaps even revolting, in the dual sense of the term.

Rather than contend with this bad affect, the affirmative visions place a broad left coalition in an imagined future (or past) beyond division. We see this in Halberstam's nostalgic framing and incitement to return to an idealized, anti-identitarian, queer

[43] A recent interesting parallel: The organizers of the tech conference, SXSW (South-by-Southwest) were inundated with threats of rape and other violence, not unlike those feminist bloggers receive, following their acceptance of a panel on the topic of online harassment. Initially they cancelled the panel but after major corporate interests pulled out, they developed a daylong summit on the topic. Jessica, Conditt, "SXSW apologizes, launches day-long Online Harassment Summit," *Engadget*, October 30, 2015, http://www.engadget.com/2015/10/30/sxsw-apologizes-launches-day-long-online-harassment-summit/, (accessed December 17, 2015).

coalition. In figuring such a coalition as the effect of recognizing that "the enemy" was outside, Halberstam's affirmative political project is "strategic" in the way advocated by radical democratic theorists. More precisely, Halberstam's broad anti-identitarian "we" is imagined as constituted through recognition of an antagonist, a "them." My point is that such an approach fails to attend to the ways in which hegemony "gets under our skin,"[44] such that a broad "we" remains imaginable, but not practicable. We might be able to see a shared interest in a counter-hegemonic project, but are repulsed when asked or compelled to move in the world differently. In this case, Halberstam's appeal to lighten up, laugh and be resilient reinstates a modern, neoliberal subject at the heart of his queer praxis.

Meanwhile, the new materialists and post-humanists whose work I noted above, and in my introduction, have advocated affirmative ethical projects.[45] In saying this I mean that, appeals to see and move in the world differently, responsibly, and with care for a broad range of others are routed through wondrous accounts of the world, the mattering of matter that exceeds and upends human agency, and the irrepressible liveliness and creativity of life. So, for example, Jane Bennett writes:

> My aim in *Vibrant Matter*, for example, was to tell a tale that might work to adjust the "regime of the sensible" so that child-like/childhood experiences of wonderful objects might again rise to the surface. The aim, in other words, was to alter the perceptual field—the style of sensing and feeling and thus also thinking—of the humans participating in the assemblage… Akin to a tradition of romantic radicalism that runs from Percy Shelley's "Defense of Poetry" to Guy Debord's "A User's Guide to Detournement" and Herbert Marcuse's "Essay on

[44] Ahmed, 216.

[45] I would argue that, despite her growing interest in ethics informed by the entanglement of language, bodies, and the world, Judith Butler does not fit here. Far from affirmative, her ethical inquiries are centered on mourning, grief, and the ways we do or do not extend these to or participate in these with others.

> Liberation," new materialisms use grand onto-images as spurs to human-scale acts of creative and collective endeavor.[46]

Similarly, feminist and post-humanist theorist Rosi Braidotti, writes:

> The key notion in posthuman nomadic ethics is the transcendence of negativity. What this means concretely is that the conditions for renewed political and ethical agency cannot be drawn from the immediate context or the current state of the terrain. They have to be generated affirmatively and creatively by efforts geared to creating possible futures…[47]

While it's especially clear in the second citation, both of these calls to action function by holding up a unifying, affirming, ethical vision as a means of "transform[ing]" destructive modern subjects with a will to dominate everything "into their opposites."[48] I agree that this is an urgent political project. I also agree with Brown's analysis that neoliberalism works by generating divisive, bad affect. However, I question the presumption that an affirmative political vision is the means through or past the impasses created by divisive, bad feeling in neoliberal times.

Feminist practices of counter-publicity developed in online safe spaces offer one site where a feminized subject is not only imagined, but also lived and practiced. These sites are often unlovely, but perhaps it is in this very unlovelyness that we gain insight into how we might collectively begin to detach ourselves from ways of being and moving in the world that undercut principled, perhaps richly theoretical, commitment to liberatory political practice

Humor will go on. The swift creation of the Twitter handle, "Jock Halberslam" (@halberslam) to parody Halberstam attests to this conclusion (Figure 8).

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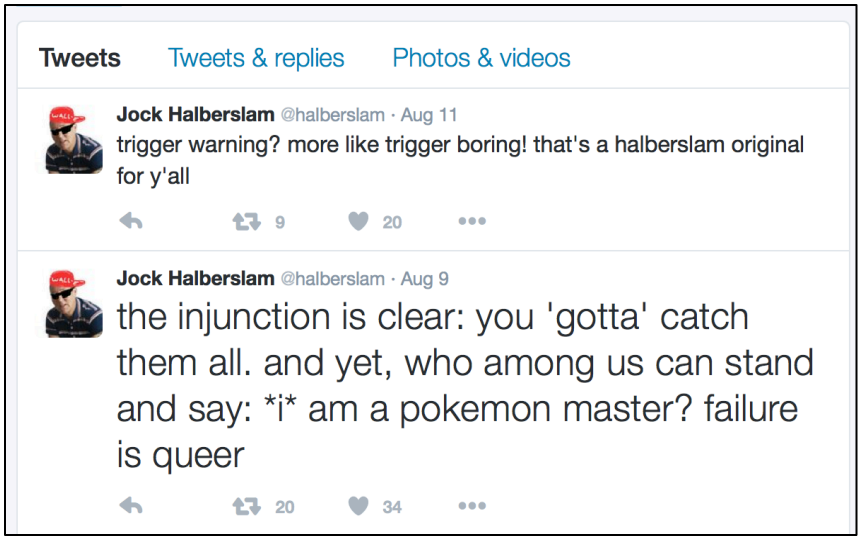
[46] Jane Bennett, "Ontology, Sensibility and Action," *Contemporary Political Theory* 14, no. 1 (February 2015): 83.
[47] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), p. 191.
[48] Bennett, "Ontology, Sensibility and Action," 84

FIGURE 8: Screenshot from the Twitter feed of "Jock Halberslam" (@halberslam).[49]



Pleasure will go on and will remain complicated. One can take pleasure in things and also be critical of those pleasures: an impeccable cappuccino at a café in one's old, now-gentrifying neighborhood; gay bridal magazines; one could go on and on… It is not possible to instantly excise oneself from the structures, which create these things as both pleasurable and problematic.

In this context, collective, counter-public practice that cultivate less defensive subjects, subjects less fearful and reactive in the face of their own inevitable complicity with local and global structures of power, are better suited to the risks and challenges of coalition politics than visions of a broad left coalition sustained by an irreverence that evades difficult topics or the good feelings accrued through individuated, ethical practice.

[49] @halberslam "Jock Halberslam," Twitter feed, https://twitter.com/halberslam, (screenshot from November 3, 2015).

CONCLUSION

My first foray into the material explored in this dissertation was in 2010. A project that began as a single paper on the feminist blog Shakesville unfurled in many directions. Some threads I've followed, some I had to set aside for later. While I cannot fully unpack later, a number of recent changes are worth noting here, alongside directions for future research.

One of the most striking changes in feminist CMC is the substantially enlarged mainstream presence of feminist authorship. Until recently, feminist contributions to mainstream online journalism and Left-progressive blogging were quite limited. Feminist authorship on mainstream sites—online sites associated with print newspapers, but also "A-list" Left-progressive blogs—was exceptional throughout the better part of the 2000s.

In 2015, prominent feminist authorship online is, if not common, at least unexceptional. The success of Jezebel, a blog intended as an alternative to "backwards" women's magazines and owned by Gawker Media, and liberal-leaning, (now) feminist-friendly sites like Salon.com and *The New Republic*, and online news aggregators, like The Huffington Post, have normalized feminist authorship and commentary.[1]

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[1] Moe, "The Five Great Lies of Women's Magazines," *Jezebel*, November 1, 2007, http://jezebel.com/262130/the-five-great-lies-of-womens-magazines (accessed December 19, 2015); *Salon*, http://www.salon.com/, (accessed December 19, 2015); *The New Republic*, https://newrepublic.com/, (accessed December 19, 2015); *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/, (accessed December 19, 2015).

At the same time, online feminist safe spaces have become more precarious because the success of mainstream feminism authorship with corporate backing has made it more difficult to retain regular contributors and traffic. With more people finding recognizably, if not explicitly feminist content on corporate-owned mainstream sites, traffic on the collaboratively constructed online safe spaces that are central to this dissertation has declined.[2]

Active authorship on a voluntary basis has always been a challenge, but the viability of feminist authorship as a source of relatively secure income is fairly recent. So, for example, Feministe founder Jill Filipovic is now Senior Political Writer for *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, one of the women's magazine to which Jezebel sought to present an alternative back in 2007[3]; Crunk Feminist Collective co-founder, Brittany Cooper, now has a weekly column at *Salon*; and Tiger Beatdown's Sady Doyle is now a freelance journalist who regularly contributes to mainstream online publications, including *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian*.

The blog-to-mainstream publication trajectory is not unique to this moment (and, of course, is not unique to feminism). What is unique is that, increasingly, mainstream feminist freelancers have gotten their start by participating in the construction of online feminist safe spaces. In order to better understand the impact of this unique background and experience, more work is needed on elaborating the relationship between mainstream feminist authorship and feminist blogging.

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[2] Echo Zen, "Boring, technical post about winter Feministe series…," *Feministe*, October 1, 2015, http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2015/10/01/boring-technical-post-about-winter-feministe-series/ (accessed December 19, 2015).
[3] Nicole Levy, "Cosmopolitan.com Hires Jill Filipovic, Burnishes Feminist Cred," *Politico Media*, April 25, 2014, http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/media/2014/04/8544253/cosmopolitancom-hires-jill-filipovic-burnishes-feminist-cred (accessed December 19, 2015).

Catalyzing Different Safe Spaces

Preliminary research suggests a fracture in the U.S. feminist blogosphere beginning around 2007 and centered on critical responses to the increased mainstream presence of feminist online writers, including the opportunities to publish that became available to select (white, college-educated, straight, cisgendered) feminists bloggers, notably Jessica Valenti of Feministing and Amanda Marcotte of Pandagon. While both Valenti and Marcotte were criticized for being inattentive to racism within feminism and to their own raced or unreflectively white-washed presentations of feminist activism, Marcotte's actions in 2007 and 20008 appear to have afforded something of a critical juncture for feminist CMC.

Marcotte, who joined the liberal blog Pandagon in 2004 after a short stint running a personal blog, was instrumental in Pandagon's development as a liberal feminist blog (Pandagon was not and did not aspire to be a safe space). In her 2007 book, *It's a Jungle Out There: The Feminist Survival Guide to Politically Inhospitable Environments*, Marcotte not only did not address racism as a feminist issue but also included multiple retro comics-style images of a white, Barbie-type woman saving and working alongside a Clark Kent-type white man, to fend off darker complexioned natives (see Figure 8). These images were removed from subsequent printings and both Marcotte and Seal Press apologized for reproducing a tired racist trope. However, many were understandably frustrated with these apologies given an earlier, pre-publication discussion (initiated by Marcotte) of the book's cover art, which initially depicted a similar white, Barbie-type woman in the clutches of an anthropomorphized, black gorilla.

Equally if not more problematic was the charge of intellectual theft or failure to acknowledge the earlier work of feminists of color, one result of which was a prominent feminist of color blogger, brownfemipower, shuttering her blog.[4] At stake for those who critiqued Marcotte was less the issue of intellectual property than the erasure of the intellectual labor. Also at issue was the characterization—made by Marcotte and several white feminist supporters—of critical pushback to Marcotte as a tired and predictable response to feminist "success," which obscured the interlocking systems of oppression that made success (and erasure of one's labor) a more likely outcome for some than others.[5] That this obscuration played on gendered tropes of women as catty infighters, trivializing criticism by recasting it as the inevitable nitpicking of jealous women, exemplified the ways in which mainstream feminism undercut the principles and goals espoused.

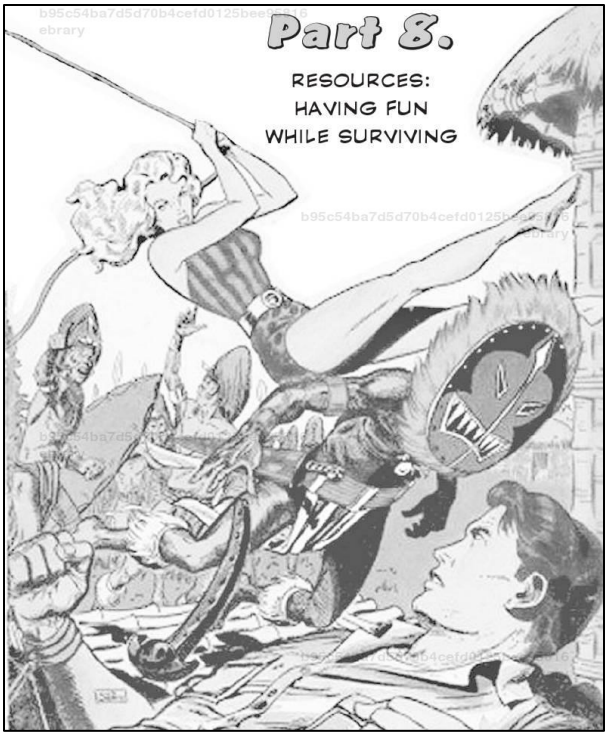

FIGURE 9: Image from Amanda Marcotte's *It's a Jungle Out There: The Feminist Survival Guide to Politically Inhospitable Environments* (2007).

[4] brownfemipower, "Some Context," April 16, 2008, https://bfpfinal.wordpress.com/2008/04/16/3/ (accessed December 20, 2015).
[5] Amanda Marcotte, "Book Cover!" *Pandagon*, August 20, 2007 https://web.archive.org/web/20071023055731/http://pandagon.blogsome.com/2007/08/20/book-cover/ (accessed December 20, 2015).

This prior mainstreaming of online feminism appears to have catalyzed some white feminist bloggers to evaluate their blogging practices: who they linked to, who contributed guest posts, who their spaces were "safe" for, who was included and who excluded. Initially, the safe spaces of feminist CMC were understood as a response to a hostile Other: anti-feminists (Internet trolls and otherwise), but also liberal-progressives who characterized feminism as divisive. Going forward, those who continued to construct their blogs as "safe spaces" increasingly did so with an awareness that their adversary was also within themselves and that, as Tiger Beatdown and Red Light Politics contributor Flavia Dzodan, put it: "**FEMINISM WILL BE INTERSECTIONAL OR IT WILL BE BULLSHIT!"**[6] In the future, I hope to elaborate on the conflict between Marcotte and brownfemipower, and its connection to the "building out" of safe spaces as sites of intersectional feminist practice.

Precarious Safe Spaces

Current mainstreaming has put quite a bit of pressure on individual and community safe space blogging, and on the feminist blogosphere as a whole. As feminist writing for a popular audience becomes common and is pitted against the typically slower rates of publication on feminist blogs figured as safe spaces, traffic at the latter has declined. As traffic declines, sustaining blogs becomes more costly. Feministe's "tigtog" recently (October 2015) posted on the topic of declining page-views, explaining that "the sustainability of keeping the blog running" is in question because "advertising is

[6] Flavia Dzodan, "MY FEMINISM WILL BE INTERSECTIONAL OR IT WILL BE BULLSHIT!" *Tiger Beatdown*, October 10, 2011, http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/ (accessed December 18, 2015). Dzodan's emphasis.

no longer covering… hosting costs," that is, the cost of making the site accessible via the World Wide Web.[7] Being one of the oldest, continuous-running feminist community blogs with an extensive archive—Feministe was founded in 2000—makes sustainability more costly and finding an alternative, potentially more affordable hosting package more challenging.[8]

While Feministe remains active, other and especially smaller feminist safe space blogs have gone dormant. Here it's worth noting that, as other blogs become inactive, those that remain active lose out on page-views they might have received by being linked to via postings on those formerly active blogs. When blogs like Tiger Beatdown and Angry Black Woman go inactive—as both have done—nodes in the network (literally) linking one blog to another go dark.

The safe spaces that remain active have had to adapt. Feministe plans to offer not "more frequent," but "more regular" and more specialized posts offering in-depth feminist reviews of games.[9] The content of the proposed series undoubtedly reflects a growing interest in feminism and games culture stirred up by recent attention to women in the video games industry, including harassment of women games producers and depictions of women in video games.

Indeed, *Feministe* expressly pitches their new series as complementary (rather than competitive) to Anita Sarkeesian's successfully crowd-funded work at the nonprofit,

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[7] tigtog, "Hello, we're back, and what happened," *Feministe*, October 7, 2015, http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2015/10/07/hello-were-back-and-what-happened/ (accessed December 19, 2015).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Echo Zen, "Boring, technical post about winter Feministe series…"

Feminist Frequency, which explores how women function as tropes in video games.[10] The harassment Sarkeesian received for her "Tropes vs Women in Video Games" has been widely publicized in a way that is uncommon, despite the still banal harassment of those who identify as women online and especially vocal feminist women. (Here it's worth noting that "adapting" in the face of decreased revenues, which does not seem to have been accompanied by decreased trolling and online harassment, is simply untenable for many.)

One especially widespread adaptation by feminist bloggers has been to create a Twitter account and use it, in part, to direct traffic to their blogs. As one might expect however, having a Twitter account and having a Twitter presence are not the same. The latter require substantial work that demonstrates familiarity with the Twitter platform and networking skills. Sites like Crunk Feminist Collective and Shakesville have been more success than others in developing this presence.[11]

Even so, Shakesville's founder and primary contributor, Melissa McEwan—who runs the blog as full-time job—has recently (2015) conveyed that it is not be sustainable for her to continue her work if donations continue at the current rate.[12] McEwan and

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[10] *Feminist Frequency: Conversations with Pop Culture*, http://feministfrequency.com/, (accessed December 19, 2015).

[11] *Feministe* is relatively inactive despite a large number of followers (24,600). On 6,199 tweets, @feministe has only 12 "likes" (@feministe, Twitter feed, December 18, 2015, https://twitter.com/Feministe?ref_src=twsrc^google|twcamp^serp|twgr^author). By contrast, *Crunk Feminist Collective* has 14,800 followers and 796 "likes" and *Shakesville* has 14,700 followers 2,476 "likes"; this indicates a smaller, but more dedicated group of followers. (@crunkfeminists, Twitter feed, December 18, 2015, https://twitter.com/crunkfeminists?ref_src=twsrc^google|twcamp^serp|twgr^author; @shaketweetz, Twitter feed, December 18, 2015, https://twitter.com/Shakestweetz). *Crunk Feminist Collective* and *Shakesville* also "follow" more people, which would expand their network (999 and 718, respectively, versus @feministe's 76).

[12] Melissa McEwan, "Important Fundraiser," *Shakesville*, August 18, 2015, http://www.shakesville.com/2015/08/important-fundraiser.html, (accessed December 19, 2015); Melissa McEwan, "Fundraiser to Keep Shakesville Going," *Shakesville*, December 3, 2015,

other sites like Feministing have had to become much more vocal in asking for the financial support of its readership;[13] this is especially important at Shakesville which, as part of its safe space practice, does not accept ads and thus has no revenue from advertising.[14] Feministing and Black Girl Dangerous have repurposed as non-profit organizations, likely to make obtaining grants more feasible, and to encourage donations through an increased perception of legitimacy and transparency as an entity to which one might donate.

The increased precariousness of online feminist safe spaces and the feminist blogosphere reflects the successful uptake by a broader public of ideas and practices cultivated by feminist blogging. At the same time, popular uptake may defang what is most radical about the practices of counter-publicity cultivated in safe spaces: the cultivation of a democratic subject as feminized, that is, as situated in material contexts reflecting structural inequality which demand relations of responsibility to strangers that extend beyond good intentions.

For example, well-known and well-trafficked blogger, Hugo Schwyzer, drew this traffic in part by reinventing himself as a male feminist and "ally." Schwyzer circulated a revisionist account of his prior history of sexist abuse which made it appear that he was taking responsibility for worldly manifestations of structural inequality not directly tied to his identity, and from which he benefitted. At the same time, a number of relatively

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http://www.shakesville.com/2015/12/fundraiser-to-keep-shakesville-going.html, (accessed December 19, 2015).

[13] Lori Adelman, "This Giving Tuesday Help Turn Feminism's 'Movement' into a Sustainable Movement," *Feministing*, December 1, 2015, http://feministing.com/2015/12/01/this-givingtuesday-help-turn-feminisms-moment-into-a-sustainable-movement/, (accessed December 19, 2015).

[14] McEwan, "Important Fundraiser."

marginalized women and, in particular, women of color, rejected Schwyzer's revisionist narrative based on ongoing harassment that they were continuing to experience.

Unfortunately, Schwyzer's new reputation and revised narrative overshadowed these women's accounts not only in a mainstream public, but also within the feminist blogosphere. Ultimately, it was the "hashtag activism" of Hood Feminism's Mikki Kendall, who started the hashtag "solidarity is for white women," that prompted the unraveling of Schwyzer's account.[15] More research needs to be undertaken on the discourses of "being an ally" arising from online feminisms, and efforts to challenge those who, like Schwyzer, repurpose feminist counter-public practice to achieve success in a liberal-individualist public. "Clapping back" by, for example, asserting that one does "not get a cookie" for basic human decency are increasingly popular idioms and fruitful places to begin this research.[16]

Finally, the publicization of harassment of women game developers, women gamers, and women critiquing games culture, noted above, has led to an increased awareness and criticism of gendered inequality online. However there is a tendency to figure harassing behavior as stemming from a small but vocal minority often termed "trolls" and figured as emasculated (because imagined as nerdy and/or sexless) young men, dwelling in their parent's basement. This characterization of trolls occludes larger questions of responsibility and valued public discourse that online feminist safe spaces

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[15] Kathleen Jercich, "Hood Feminist: The creator of #solidarityisforwhitewomen talks race and online feminism," *In These Times*, January 2, 2014, http://inthesetimes.com/article/15979/hood_feminist (accessed December 20, 2015); Jia Tolentino, "A Chat with Mikki Kendall and Flavia Dzodan About #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen" *The Hairpin*, August 16, 2013, http://thehairpin.com/2013/08/solidarity-is-for-hairpin/ (accessed December 20, 2015).

[16] The Angry Black Woman, "Things You Need to Understand—#9," *The Angry Black Woman*, April 29, 2008, https://theangryblackwoman.wordpress.com/2008/04/29/no-cookie/ (accessed December 20, 2015).

dramatize, as well as evidence that nearly one-third of Americans have engaged in trolling, or deliberately disruptive behaviors intended to silence or "derail" public online conversation or communities. It also ignores that trolling is not inherently anti-feminist.[17] In short, the focus on trolls sets up an Other who is increasingly easy to disparage, without addressing the pervasive misogyny that make gendered harassment via trolling pervasive and also makes emasculation the "natural" form of disparagement of those who engage in such practices. More research is needed to unpack the fraught relationship between trolling, particular demographics, and practices of publicity online.

[17] Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*; Virgil Texas, "How I Infiltrated a White Pride Facebook Group and Turned It into 'LGBT Southerners for Michelle Obama'," *Vice Magazine*, August 3, 2015, http://www.vice.com/read/virgil-texas-white-power-facebook-group-troll (December 18, 2015).

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